

H. Charles Fishman

The Runaway Adolescent:

A Therapy of Options

Treating Troubled Adolescents

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The Runaway Adolescent: A Therapy of Options

Wedn'sday morning at five o'clock as the day begins
Silently closing her bedroom door
Leaving the note that she hoped would say more
She goes downstairs to the kitchen clutching her handkerchief
Quietly turning the backdoor key
stepping outside she is free

She (we gave her most of our lives) is leaving
(sacrificed most of our lives) Home (We gave her everything
money could buy)
She's leaving home after living alone for so many years
Something inside that was always denied for so many years—
She's leaving home
Bye-bye

-JOHN LENNON and PAUL MCCARTNEY

THERE WAS A TIME in our history when running away from home might have been seen more as an adventurous passage of adolescence rather than as an admission of family problems and failure. Children longed to go off with the circus or dreamed of floating down a river with Huck Finn. The paths taken might not have been easy, but in the end the adolescent returned to loving relatives and assumed more responsible, adult behavior.

Such is the stuff of romance and literature. As Blair Justice and David F. Duncan (1976) point out in their perceptive article on runaways, these fantasies of the past pale in comparison to today's harsh realities. They quote from a report by former senator Birch Bayh:

Unlike Mark Twain's era, running away today is a phenomenon of our cities. Most runaways are young, inexperienced suburban kids who run away to major urban areas ... they often become the easy victims of street gangs, drug pushers and hardened criminals. Without adequate food or shelter, they are prey to a whole range of medical ills from upper respiratory infection to venereal disease (Bayh 1973).

In the decade and a half since Bayh's report, the problem has only worsened. Lappin and Covelman (1985) report estimates of five hundred thousand to two million runaways per year—approximately

one out of every seven teenagers. Other figures confirm that as many as a million teenagers run away from American homes each year (Young et al. 1983; Farber et al. 1984). Most of these adolescents continue to come from white suburbs. At least half are female, and many are no older than thirteen or fourteen. As researcher Helm Stierlin (1973) points out, "Only drug abuse, with which it has many links, rivals running away in importance as a mental health issue for young Americans. And, like drug abuse, running away taxes your abilities for understanding and treatment" (p. 56).

There are, of course, many speculations about the causes of this epidemic of runaways. What research has been done seems to indicate that the families of runaways experience more breaks and stressful life events such as death, divorce, and separation. In addition, runaways are frequently subjected to beatings, problems of alcoholic parents, recurring arguments between separated or divorced parents, and the negative experiences of a father's prolonged unemployment (Roberts 1982). Obviously such family experiences are not uncommon. It is now estimated that for noninstitutionalized adolescents in the twelve to seventeen age group, 10 percent of boys and 8.7 percent of girls run away from home at least once (Farber et al. 1984). These are children who leave or stay away from home on purpose, knowing they will be missed, and who intend to stay away for some time.

How are we, as family therapists, to approach this problem? Perhaps we should begin by keeping in mind the basic fact that for many adolescents running away is a final weaning from a difficult family organization; in fact, in many cases running away is the best of few good alternatives, some of which could lead to self-destructive behavior through drugs or suicide. This chapter takes a look at such an adolescent—one who *chooses* to live on the streets because her family was, in her view, unsupportive.

The middle- or even upper-class teenager who runs away may not be so different from the child of poverty who lives in the streets: they both perceive their homes as lacking in basic nurturing and support. For these children, the chaos of the home seems unrelenting, while the chaos of the streets can at least be offset by anonymity and the companionship of peers in like circumstances. To adults running away seems radical and foolhardy; from the adolescent's viewpoint, however, in addition to escape it can offer the realization of a universal quest for freedom and independence.

Often a runaway adolescent's most compelling complaint about home life is that it is "too strict." A

look just under the surface, however, usually reveals that the problem is not a frustrating strictness but a parental conflict triangulating the child. It is common in these families for one or even both parents to be going through a mid-life crisis. For example, career change, caring for members of the older generation, and marital conflict may all be increasing the vulnerability of the family system. These developmental crises in the adult subsystem frequently stimulate behavior problems in the children. Unfortunately, it is often the case that the parents then focus exclusively on their adolescent's behavior, neglecting to address their own problems which in part were responsible for their child's difficulty. Thus we have the makings of a vicious circle.

In working with such families therapists should attempt to distinguish the parental and the adolescent's issues. The object is to keep the parents in their executive position in the family hierarchy while enabling them to present *options* for the child. If parents misunderstand the therapist and think the solution is only a matter of getting tough, the therapy will be futile. The therapeutic goal is to help the parents both to be firm and to provide options.

General Principles

CREATING A THERAPY OF OPTIONS

The runaway child sees no other option but to run away and escape. In these rigid, inflexible family systems there is a paucity of alternatives which can be effectively expanded through a therapy of alternatives, a therapy of negotiation. The ultimate goal is to establish a family system in which the child does not have to run away from home but can *walk* away from home at the appropriate time. This therapy should end when options are opened not only for the child but for the parents as well, options that enable them to come to terms with the developmental issues stressing the family system.

HELPING THE ADULTS NEGOTIATE BETWEEN THEMSELVES

The first stage in the therapy of families with an adolescent runaway is to help the adults learn to negotiate between themselves in the presence of the children. This negotiation should serve to distinguish parental and adolescent issues as well as to prepare the parents to begin negotiating with

their children. In this type of family system retrieval of the child is most likely to go awry when preparations for the adolescent's return *precede* the ability of the parents to negotiate between themselves. When this happens the adolescent may return home, but the environment of the home may demonstrate the same chaos that caused the child to leave in the first place. And even if the adolescent does not run away again, other forms of rebellion are likely.

In order to facilitate the process of family negotiation, the therapist must first deal with the unrealistic fears on both sides that are keeping the system stuck. The fear of what the adolescent might do keeps the parents incapacitated and renders them ineffective. The fear of parental actions frustrates or frightens the adolescent and drives him to run away. A principal task for the therapist is the acknowledgment and handling of these fears. Frequently the parents have great difficulty in assessing and handling their own fears. Unrealistic fears may indicate doubts in one or both parents about their own adequacy and safety within the family. The therapist must face this issue directly and early in the course of treatment, for the distortion of fears and the resulting confusion about what is or is not likely to happen may put the adolescent in real jeopardy. For example, in the family about to be discussed the father was terrified that if he asserted executive authority over his daughter she would rebel further and perhaps become a prostitute. The mother was fearful of her daughter holding a grudge against her for years to come.

WORKING TOWARD THE ADOLESCENT'S PARTICIPATION IN THE TRANSFORMATION

Of course, the adolescent has fears as well, and these must also be addressed if the process of negotiation is to be successful. Every effort must be made to get the adolescent to participate and to believe that a negotiated transformation of the system will open real options and alleviate fears. This participation needs to begin in the treatment room and then be extended outside to the family context.

Ultimately, the prognosis for permanent change in families with adolescent runaways depends on the parents' capacity to be both firm and flexible. Their foremost responsibility is to keep their children free from harm, but this can never be accomplished if the adolescents themselves are not given the opportunity to be free. To the extent that the therapist can help parents retain their executive power while allowing their children real choices, the therapy will be successful.

Clinical Example: Maria, On Her Own at Age Fifteen

Our illustrative case revolves around Maria, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a prominent family and the third of five children. Her sisters were nine, twelve, and seventeen years old. Her brother was twenty. At the time of the therapy Maria had moved in with a boy in a poor area of the city and had been living apart from the family for some months. What precipitated Maria's leaving home was her categorical refusal to follow her parents' rules.

ASSESSMENT USING THE FOUR-DIMENSIONAL MODEL

History

The family was well established in New Jersey. The father was seen as a very successful professional. The parents had met at a European high school and had been married for twenty-one years. Their family backgrounds were very different. The mother's family was Latin and quite emotional, whereas the father's English family was more distant. The father had been seeing a psychiatrist because of problems at work and was taking antidepressants at the time of the family therapy.

Development

Maria's father had been extremely depressed over the last nine months. He worked as a highly successful graphic designer in a very competitive advertising agency, and he feared that he might be losing his ability to handle the required technical details. The mother had been confronted with the developmental pressure of having her children need her less and less as they became increasingly autonomous. Trained in anthropology to the bachelor's degree level, she did not feel that she had any immediate employment opportunities.

Structure

The parents had an extremely distant relationship. I learned in the course of the therapy that their sex life had been essentially nonexistent for at least two years. Each of their relationships with the children differed drastically. In this family the mother was the more concerned parent, while the father

was initially intimidated by the girl's threats. As the mother became braver, the father became increasingly subject to the girl's intimidation. The symptomatic child had a special position in the family: not only was she the child who most challenged the rules of the system, but she was also a strikingly beautiful girl. With her dark beauty she reminded one of the very young Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*.

Process

In this intellectual, educated family, there was a firm belief that all difficulties needed only to be explained away. However, there was no negotiation per se, just intellectualization. The girl moved out when the parents told her that if she didn't follow the rules, she would have to go. There was no precedent of the family as a laboratory in which to practice negotiation skills; this was partly the result of the extreme terror this family had for any emergence of conflict.

The effect of a system like this on the therapist is very interesting. It is easy to become seduced by the high-level talk and to feel as though one is conversing with one's college professor. On a social level this family could be friends with the therapist, and this presents a real challenge: the therapist's job, after all, is to transform the system, not to be a good guest at a cocktail party. The therapist should act as a foreign body in the system, making the system challenge its rules and obliging it to change.

THE HOMEOSTATIC MAINTAINER

When the parents were challenged in the session, first one and then the other would act as the homeostatic maintainer. The father acknowledged the necessity for negotiation but actually excluded his wife from the process. At an early point in the therapy he undermined attempts to have the parents come to an agreement by trying to convince the therapist that he should see Maria alone. As the session continued I attempted to have the father function as a co-therapist to convince his wife to join with him in bringing their daughter home. The mother would demur from supporting her husband and insisted that the daughter should be involved in the decision. I found myself having to constantly monitor whichever parent was carrying the baton in order to address the therapy toward neutralizing the homeostatic efforts.

WORKING FOR BRIEF THERAPY

In my experience the key patterns enumerated earlier lead to fast change. By dealing with the parental dyad prior to bringing the child home and then working with the system to create a therapy of negotiation, the likelihood was increased that the return would not be short lived.

THE THERAPY

Searching for a Therapeutic Middle Ground

With this type of family system the adolescent can be very confused as to what is allowable behavior and what is not. The parents vary between rigid enforcement and extreme indulgence. These were not really tough parents; they were parents who resorted to a choking, tough response after having allowed their daughter too much leeway to do whatever she wished. Maria experienced her parents as giving permission and then taking it back, and she interpreted their ambivalence as betrayal. Therapy had to be directed toward making them less indulgent and more thoughtful about a variety of issues. They would then not appear so rigid when the time came to make demands.

What appeared on the surface to be a rigid family system was in reality a system in flux. The system remained unstable because it had no mid-range, no effective modulation. Since the parents could not work out a sense of balance for themselves or for their marriage, they could not respond to the needs of the adolescent. What Maria needed was not extremes but a gradual development of autonomy.

In families with runaways, we assume that the adolescent is not running away because he or she is crazy. Rather, the adolescent is running away because there is something very poisonous in the family context. The goal of therapy, then, is to help create a different kind of context, one from which the child will not have to escape. Thus, in this case, close attention was placed on *what Maria had to run back to*. She could not run back to a family that would only become more authoritarian. It had to be a family that had learned compromise and found a middle ground. It had to be more executive, yes, but also more balanced, without the discordant equivocation between the parents that frustrated the girl and caused her to seek escape.

I speculated earlier about the contextual pressures that were keeping the parents rigid and pushing them to act in extremes. The father was blocked in his work and having a profound mid-life crisis. The mother was undergoing a vocational reentry crisis; and this mutual upheaval was causing a deep dissatisfaction with each other as spouses. The parents could not be flexible, either with each other or with their daughter; they remained wrapped up in their own lives and problems. Because of the constricting pressure of their individual life crises, dialogue had ceased—and dialogue, as we know, is part of what permits the family to be a flexible organization. With this family, then, the system had become rigid as the parents acted to maintain it by focusing more and more on their rebellious daughter, thus diffusing their own difficulties. Of course, their difficulties with Maria exacerbated their sense of helplessness in their own lives.

The parents in this family were no longer a couple, but merely two individuals in crisis. Their marital evolution had stopped as each spouse withdrew into him- or herself. The adolescent's acting up was the only thing that brought them together; in this sense, her running away can be seen as constructive. The job of the therapist was to help rework the system so that the parents would have more than their troublesome daughter holding them together.

Reworking the System

All family systems are idiosyncratic because of the discrete personalities of the participants. An important ubiquitous therapeutic drama for the therapist to consider, however, is: the reorganization of the system so that there is a functional structure for all family members to differentiate by the imposition of boundaries in a way that is gradual and life-enhancing rather than abrupt and pathologically arresting. The underlying issues can often be addressed through negotiation, leading to the shifting of the homeostatic maintainers for increased freedom and openness.

As we have seen, in the therapy of the runaway adolescent we are most often dealing with a rigid system that must be opened up through an emphasis on negotiation and the creation of options. Obviously this therapeutic task can be accomplished only by getting the family to deal in a more functional way with the runaway. But before a family can learn functional negotiation, it is first necessary to reorganize the system so that the parents speak with a single voice in challenging their adolescent. In

this case, the parents did not really know what they wanted from their daughter, so they worked against each other. They seemed to take turns overprotecting the girl, alternating in their firm and lax reactions to her running away. The therapy had to focus on getting the parents to act in concert and then on creating coherent generational boundaries within the family. Afterward, the reentry process had to be closely monitored so that as the family healed, the individual space would be reworked and the adolescent could exist within the system instead of feeling she had to find space through extraordinary means.

In the session that follows, the overriding emphasis was on establishing negotiation—negotiation within limits, but negotiation nevertheless. These parents experienced themselves as being frequently incapable of exercising firm executive functions, such as establishing curfews or rules against certain behavior. This action was perceived as "against our nature," a violation of the very concept of who they were as people and as a family. But to preserve themselves as a family this had to change. The parents had to learn to negotiate between themselves and with their daughter. They could not assume that the "expert" would mediate their problems for them.

The following excerpts are all from the second therapy session.

DR. FISHMAN: Did you have a chance to talk, just the two of you, without the participation of the kids? Because it seems to me that you are really in a fix.

MOTHER: What do you mean?

DR. FISHMAN: Well, I'm not sure what you are going to do.

MOTHER: Well, I can't help but think there must be other methods.

DR. FISHMAN: Talk together about that and see if you can get an idea.

MOTHER: We do so much (*she laughs*). Now we come to talk to you.

DR. FISHMAN: Well, talk together about it. I have really told you the way I see it. The way I see it, you have to choose a way to present a united front to your daughter. There is no other alternative. So talk together about it.

MOTHER: Well, just let me say okay, then, if you say we have to choose that we want to negotiate. But you seem ...

DR. FISHMAN: Check with your husband, and see what he wants.

FATHER: Yes, I also feel that we should negotiate, for the simple reason that I feel that we don't know each other well

enough, so to say. I think we would find out much more about what Maria really wants.

In these few minutes the rigidity of the family could be perceived. The mother was inflexible in her effort to transform the problem into a dialogue with the therapist, which compelled me to handle her inexorability with a dismissal. Realizing that her request was a red herring, a distraction, I centered her back on her husband. That was precisely what she did not want to do. She wanted to talk about negotiation, but she did not really want to negotiate. Instead she wanted to engage me in a useless battle. The rigidity was expressed in her inability to turn to her husband for an exchange. The counter to that, 'the therapeutic management, was to rechannel her firmly back to her task.

DR. FISHMAN: What Maria wants? She's only fifteen. I'm not so concerned about what Maria wants. She is in a dangerous situation!

FATHER: Well, I am. I'm telling you what I think. You asked me to say something, so give me a chance to say it. I have been very interested in knowing what Maria really wants. I think that's the way to get to her. Not in a session or a whole group, but probably the best way, so that she would be able to open up more, would be if she had a session with you alone. And then, after that, you two would be able to come to a formulation that she would be willing to tell us about, as to what her aims are and her ideas. And then we may be able to talk about that. I think right now she is sort of pushed into a corner and as a result of it she takes a very extreme position that she wants to do exactly what she wants to do, and there is no giving in on anything. Which is a very good negotiating position, let's face it.

When an impasse develops over the process of the adolescent's reentry into the family, the therapist often finds that the problem is a misperception by one of the participants. In this case, the father perceives negotiation to be a process that should exist between one adult and the child. He expresses more interest in his daughter than in his wife as a way of avoiding conflict with his spouse. In such a situation the therapist must refocus the parents so that it becomes clear that at this moment the issue is not the negotiation with the girl but negotiation with each other, whatever the risk of conflict. In this first stage they must decide between themselves what they want, then negotiate for it with the girl. Confusion about this sequence of negotiation can paralyze the therapy.

DR. FISHMAN: Maria, how long have you known the person you are living with?

MARIA: Maybe a month.

DR. FISHMAN: A month?

MARIA: Three weeks, something like that.

DR. FISHMAN (*to the father*): Your fifteen-year-old daughter is living with a—how old is this fellow?

MARIA: About eighteen.

DR. FISHMAN: An eighteen-year-old man. And you're talking about getting to know her better! So that, right now, she is in a good position to negotiate. I don't understand.

FATHER: She lives with this fellow. She lived with a family before. And she's trying to come out.

DR. FISHMAN: But she's only fifteen.

FATHER: I know she's fifteen.

MOTHER: I guess what you are saying—can one force her? One can physically force someone to do something and that will work to a certain point. But can you change their being, their essence?

DR. FISHMAN: That will happen later. But right now, if you wanted her home by 9:30 when she lives with you, because you worry where she is.... Now you don't know where she is at all. What can you do? How can you stay away?

FATHER: We are not happy about it.

DR. FISHMAN: But how can you tolerate it—as a father?

The father is the homeostatic maintainer at this point. To disrupt the homeostasis, I challenge him by telling him he is accepting the unacceptable.

FATHER: All I can say is that if she is home I feel that what she is doing is things that I don't approve of, but at least I can live with.

It was necessary to point out to these parents that they are not being as decent and protective as they believe—that they are wrong in acting as though the problem will resolve itself if they simply wait their daughter out. The goal of the therapist is not simply to provoke the parents into getting tough, but to change the homeostatic mechanism that is keeping this system stuck in its unhappiness.

We also see here that the family pathology did express itself in a way that was immediately detectable. The father did recognize the necessity of negotiating with his daughter, but he also acted to exclude his wife from the process. If this exclusion were allowed to continue, it would only reinforce the homeostasis and doom the negotiation. As a result I had to interrupt and start the sequence afresh. The therapeutic operation had to be directed to restoring the parents as a working hierarchy of caretakers in agreement. Only then could they begin to successfully negotiate their daughter's return to the family in the proper role of a girl requiring supervision.

Creating Intensity

In the next sequence, the therapist struggles against the rigidity of the family system, increasing the intensity in order to overcome the system's persistent conflict avoidance.

FATHER: If she is so insistent on living away, that is just incompatible. Then, in a sense, to a certain extent, at least temporarily, I have to wash my hands of it.

DR. FISHMAN: I understand that. That's how you've been thinking. But how can you stand it?

FATHER: Well, partly by not thinking about it too terribly much. Because I have enough problems to worry about as it is. Not because I love it, or because I think it's great. But because it's very, very undesirable—one of a number of undesirable occurrences.

MOTHER: We saw no other solution, except that Maria would leave home.

DR. FISHMAN: Do you worry about her? How about at 11:00? Do you worry about her?

FATHER: Not too often, my friend.

DR. FISHMAN: Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night?

FATHER: Seldom. I do occasionally, but not very often.

DR. FISHMAN: Do you ever wake up early in the morning?

FATHER: I think that some days I don't think about her at all. Maybe that's wrong, but it's true.

DR. FISHMAN: But the days that you do think about her. Do you worry and wonder where she is?

FATHER: I hope she's at work. I hope she's sufficiently tired from work that she'll go home and go to bed, as I think that many days she does.

DR. FISHMAN: This fellow that she's living with, do you know anything about him?

FATHER: No. But I think it's better that she's here than if she runs off to San Francisco and becomes a prostitute. Which may very well be a result of what you're suggesting.

DR. FISHMAN: I'm suggesting she become a prostitute?

FATHER: No, you're not suggesting it. I say what you are suggesting might lead to it. If we try to restrain her physically, the first thing she'll do—not go to school so we can catch her. Next thing she'll do is—so the cops can't catch her—go to New York, or New Orleans, or San Francisco, Tijuana, Mexico or someplace, and make a living the way she can. The quickest and easiest way is to become a prostitute. I think that's far worse than what she is doing now.

At this point in the therapy it became clear that the parents' conflict avoidance had to be directly challenged. Only then would husband and wife begin dealing with each other, which was the first step they had to take before they could effectively deal with their daughter. My way of encouraging this transformation was to shake the homeostatic maintainer. In taking this approach, however, the therapist must be prepared for some counterattacks. In this case the father reacted by implying that I endorsed a dangerous means of control that would lead the girl to worse problems, such as prostitution. These concerns were, I believe, not valid; the girl had never raised the subject of prostitution nor made any threats along those lines. I saw the father's preoccupation with such fantasies as his way of maintaining the homeostasis, in the sense that these fears kept him from addressing the conflictual issues at hand: the necessity of joining with his wife and bringing his daughter home. It was just such fears on the part of the parents that allowed the girl to prevail, because their fears prevented them from taking a decisive position on their daughter's behavior. The father was afraid that any attempt to control the girl's behavior would cause her to reject her parents and assume the even more negative identity of a prostitute. As a result they chose to do nothing. However, I believe the situation was in reality quite different. It was not firm action but the lack of it that was pushing their daughter to extremes.

This case cannot be explained satisfactorily without considering the complexities and the contradictions of the family system. It is not that these parents were unconcerned for their daughter's welfare; their overconcern with the danger their daughter was in was helping to maintain the unwanted behavior. The therapy had to work to make them aware of the *real* danger rather than the imagined one. Moreover, these parents, who felt extremely guilty and afraid of losing their child, at the same time saw their daughter as grown-up and beyond their reach. They saw the girl as a sophisticated, urbane, very sexual creature—a view that I challenged. The system's perception of the girl was full of contradictions; she was both an ultrasophisticate and a child. These contradictions helped to produce the madly oscillating system from which the adolescent felt she must flee.

DR. FISHMAN: Do you agree that your daughter could become a prostitute? Could you see if your wife thinks that?

MOTHER: I would like to think that Maria has more—basically that wouldn't happen. But I cannot give myself any kind of guarantee that it wouldn't. And that's what I'm afraid of.

FATHER: Maria is so hard in her aims—and so resistant.

MOTHER: At least now we have communication with her, and at least we are talking to each other. I think that's worth something.

FATHER: I think that's very true, what you say. At least if we try to get back together again, we will not first have to find out who has to say the first word. Because at least we are talking a little bit. Not much, but by God, it's going to take a long time for that to happen. And it's that state we have.

DR. FISHMAN: So the two of you are not satisfied.

MOTHER: No, we're not.

FATHER: Not "satisfied"—that's the wrong word.

DR. FISHMAN: Well, you say you want to negotiate and you say you can't ...

FATHER: I didn't say that.

DR. FISHMAN: ... at this point.

I am slowly moving the parents to accept the fact that they have to begin to negotiate right now, with the daughter in the room. However, to do this, the father's objection that the daughter cannot negotiate must be overcome. This requires tenacity and intensity; if I give in to the father's understanding of the situation, nothing will change.

In the following segment, exasperated, I urge the father to negotiate, and the girl, like the archetypal adolescent, makes her plea for freedom, decision, and choice. He cannot succeed without his wife.

FATHER: At this point. Not today, right? I said we should find out more closely what it is Maria really wants.

DR. FISHMAN: Why don't you ask her.

FATHER: I said, I don't think it will come out. I will ask her if you want me to, but I don't think it's going to come out in this kind of conversation.

DR. FISHMAN: Go ahead. Maria, could you tell us in any way?

FATHER: What are really the most important things that you feel that you want, and you cannot have at home?

MARIA: I can say it pretty generally—a lot more freedom. I mean, I could say a lot of little things. Like, if I wanted to stay somewhere for dinner. I would have to call, and a lot of times you'd say no. And I wouldn't see any reason why I couldn't. That's little things. Or maybe more of your acceptance of what I want to do. Not so much you guys just thinking, well, we're the parents. I know that's the way it is, you guys are the parents, and you make the rules. And I have to listen to them and go by them, or I can't stay in the house. I don't really know. Just being able to make more of my own decisions, even if they're not right. So I'll find out if they're not right. But I don't want you to have to tell me how I can run my life, who my friends should be, who my friends shouldn't be, and where I should go. I guess that's part of it, at least.

Working with the family of a runaway can be very tricky. While participants may speak as if they want to negotiate, what they may really want is recognition as the "good" negotiator. They want to be seen as acting in accordance with the goals of the therapist, but this does not necessarily mean they want to achieve those goals. In this case the father wants to be the good guy, the one who does the negotiations, as opposed to his wife, who is excluded. If permitted, the father would negotiate everything with the adolescent as though his wife were not present. But in fact he is not in favor of true negotiations; rather, he is attempting to prevent the girl from feeling pressured. This is his way of expressing his special bond with his lovely daughter and seeking never to lose her favor.

At every moment of hesitation I continued to try to get the parents to talk, and to convey to them the message that *they* had to change in order for their daughter to come back.

DR. FISHMAN: These are things that will haunt you for the rest of your life. If she's out on the streets and she gets hurt, this will haunt the two of you for the rest of your lives.

MARIA: But I can get hurt anywhere.

DR. FISHMAN: Talk together about how you are going to change your wife. You need to change her, so that your daughter will come back.

FATHER: I don't think she wants to be changed.

MOTHER: Locking you up for the next six months is not precisely living at home.

Predictably, the father defends the girl, persisting in his attempt to ally with his daughter. While the father is developing this alliance, the mother simply expresses disagreement. At this point, she begins to act as the homeostatic maintainer. And when I try to get the father to deal directly with his wife, he resists and again acts to maintain the homeostasis. Here is a process in which the role of homeostatic maintainer shifts back and forth between husband and wife, an illusive process that ultimately stymies change.

Later in the session Maria leaves the room and I continue the task of getting the parents to be of one mind. To dissipate the fears each has of exerting executive authority over their daughter, I attempt to unbalance the system by supporting each parent as they challenge the other. This gentle intensity confirms each parent while challenging their reality that their daughter is a potential powderkeg.

DR. FISHMAN: Are you going to bring her home tonight or not?

MOTHER: I feel more courageous now because I simply feel that there's no other choice. Because I don't think we can say that much more. I mean, the kids can have their say. We pretty well know about Maria, but the other kids, they talk to us. So we pretty well know what their ideas are.

FATHER: It's good this way. When Billy was a baby and he would start to cry for no reason at all, I could stop him, essentially by punishing him by spanking him very lightly. And he would cry a little louder and a little louder, and then he would stop. And I remember I tried the same with Cathy. She would just get louder and louder and I realized that she would die from loss of breath before she would give up crying. So, it's certainly a point that I realized that a certain form of punishment certainly didn't work with her. And in effect, with Cathy, nothing would work and she's been very loud and very noisy about it. Maria, so far nothing's worked except she's been very quiet about it. She doesn't say anything—keeps to herself, does what she wants...

MOTHER: You mean you really feel that Maria—well, I think she does want to come home. I've heard that often enough from her, and from others, but ...

DR. FISHMAN: You need to decide—the two of you. You are having a terrible time coming to this decision. You need to decide.

FATHER: I find so many—I can't go back to the present state.

MOTHER: We're afraid. Okay, I'm afraid. I'm afraid to take such a big risk.

FATHER: Maria has very much the attitude that what happens to other people won't happen to her.

DR. FISHMAN: You're taking that attitude. You're saying that she is not going to get murdered in that neighborhood.

FATHER: She also feels this. For example, we saw this movie of a girl who ran away from home, became a prostitute, came home again, ran away again. She was watching with us, and I'm sure she felt, "That's not me."

DR. FISHMAN: It's a big decision, but you need to make it.

MOTHER: Is this what you recommend to most of your families that fall into the same category with us? It scares the living daylights out of the kids. And then they come back and, you know—they get together, get with it again. I mean, if it works that magically, then I think it must be wonderful.

FATHER: I think it would be magical if we would get to the nitty gritty of this. It would be pretty raw.

DR. FISHMAN: That's right. And then you're in charge. And then she's relieved, because she's not so powerful. But talk together, because I don't hear the two of you getting even close.

FATHER: I feel like she is under an awful lot of pressure right now, and I don't think we (*indicating himself and his wife*) should add to it.

MOTHER: I also feel that if we should not say, well, next Friday you have to be home, I think that would be wrong.

FATHER: But do you feel that you could try this and stick to it? Because let's face it, when we walked up here we believed not a single word of this whole thing. And so, are we just being talked into it by a clever car salesman, or do you actually feel that it may work?

The parents are attempting to escape, via the therapist, from the unavoidable task of having to negotiate as two grownups in charge of their runaway daughter. Notice that it is not the husband who

demands they get firmer, it is the therapist. I handle their objections not by engaging in a debate, but by responding with silence and then returning to the task. Fortunately, the husband had already been sufficiently pushed on the issue and was ready to consider negotiating with his wife. The following sequence shows the exchange of fears and the beginning of real negotiation.

MOTHER: I guess I was hoping there would be another solution—a different solution.

FATHER: I feel the same way there. *(He pauses)* Yes, that's about the way my father ran the family and I did have some bad moments; although I must say I still do respect him. *(Quietly, to his wife)* So, shall we?

MOTHER: *(Sighing and smiling to herself)* We took the risk when we asked. We said she could leave, so she left, and we *(glancing at husband)* took that risk.

FATHER: You've got to stop being nice to her when she's hurting.

MOTHER: I know.

FATHER: You don't have to stop being nice to her when she's good.

A real dialogue is beginning between husband and wife. They glance and look at one another, almost as if they were a young couple flirting. It looks like a genuine process, and that produces a moment of great reassurance for the wife when the husband says, "You don't have to stop being nice to her."

DR. FISHMAN: That's an important distinction. That's a very important distinction.

MOTHER: Maybe I should have. I've never stopped being nice to her. That's the trouble maybe. I've always tried to be....

DR. FISHMAN: You need to be with him. Do you want to get her?

(Maria reenters the room and the negotiation with her continues, this time with the parents united as a negotiating team.)

FATHER: Okay, so we need to talk about it a little more. I don't think we've said anything very new. And if so, we haven't tried to say anything behind your back. But we have decided that you are coming home tonight. We will help you pick up your stuff.

MARIA: I don't have any stuff to pick up. Some of it is at Sally's house.

FATHER: Do you need it tonight?

MARIA: No.

FATHER: Okay, then you can just come into the house.

MARIA: What's that for? Just tonight?

FATHER: No. To stay.

MARIA: And what if I don't?

FATHER: Do you want all the rules—what if, and what if—so you will know exactly how far we will go? You have to realize we are your parents and we are in charge.

MARIA: Well, I didn't come to this ... *(She begins to cry)* I didn't come to these meetings to be told that I have to come home. You said we'd come here to compromise. I mean, I didn't have to come to these things. I don't think it's really fair to me to tell me I have to come home, when you told me before if I wanted to live ... You sort of told me I had to leave if I didn't want to go by the rules. So I chose to do that, and we agreed that I could do that. And that's what I've been doing.

FATHER: And you also agreed to come here for help. And apparently the form of the help is that you are to come home, Maria. It's not that we are trying to play a mean trick on you. But we have become convinced that the only way to take care of you properly is that you come home.

MARIA: So, I walk right out the door then.

FATHER: I don't want you to. And I don't think you're going to. There are other things that we can try, but I hope you won't try.

MARIA: I don't think doing this is very fair, and I don't think it's going to help anything. You guys can tell me that I have to come home now, and live at home—and you also told me to leave. I've been doing all this stuff on my own. I just found another place to stay.

The father tries to justify and defend the impossible position they had worked themselves into by having told their daughter to leave.

FATHER: We didn't tell you to leave. We told you at home there were certain rules, and if you couldn't live with them, that you would have to leave. That's what we said, okay.

As Maria pushes and negotiates for her right to more autonomy she seeks an admission from him that her particular perception was a reasonable outcome of the way she had been treated. Now the father has to retreat, by saying, "We didn't tell you to leave." He equivocates—a process that always exacerbates problems between parents and adolescents.

MARIA: And we agreed that I could leave and I did leave. And now you're telling me I have to come home. After you just told me I should leave.

Maria immediately reacts and goes after the essence of the confrontation: their waffling behavior.

If the adolescent is not validated in her reading of reality, she will find it impossible to go back into a family context that nullifies her process of independent thinking and perception.

The father now shifts and abandons his rigidity.

FATHER: It's also changed for me. It's not something that I come to very easily. But I realize by letting you go, we have not been taking care of you as parents should. We have changed our minds. It's not to be mean to you. You might say you've had a vacation. I hope it was good for you—was good for us—but things can't continue like that.

The father's formulation could, of course, be construed as just going soft again. But in the context of the negotiation, this exchange reflects the father's readiness to concede that his daughter can perceive reality correctly. It shows that he is sensitive to her perceptions. Prognostically this is a very good sign. This beginning of sensitivity will encourage the girl to return without feeling that she is going back into hell.

DR. FISHMAN (*to the Mother*): Why don't you say something? Because Maria needs to know where you stand.

MOTHER: I agree with Daddy. I think it's been a very hard decision for us, but it doesn't look at this point as if there's any other way. And while you have been living away from us, it hasn't been because we wished it, and thought that was the solution. It was a temporary solution, because we saw no other way at that time. Things were at a point where we just didn't know what else to do. In the meantime, we have come here for help. Time has passed. We've seen some things that have happened to you, the life that you are living—the life we are living—and we feel it's time for you to come home. Do you know that we've always been afraid of things that can happen to you? You are under age. You can be picked up and you can be taken advantage of. There are a lot of things. You have been slipping in your schoolwork—late many times. And I give you a lot of credit for the things you've done, but there are also things that

FATHER: She has been able to take care of herself—she has. But that doesn't mean walking the streets alone at night.

MARIA: How do you know that? Where do I walk alone? I barely ever walk alone. I was just talking to Cathy about that. If I lived at home that could happen to me anyway.

FATHER: No, because we don't let Cathy walk alone by herself at night. We always walk her back to the dorm, or something. None of us goes out at night alone by ourselves.

MARIA: I don't walk alone anywhere.

MOTHER: Well, that's not the most important thing. I would hope in some time you will find other friends, other activities, something that will be more meaningful in your life.

MARIA: You've been saying that to me for two years now. I'm not going to change my friends, and I don't want to change my friends. You can't make me do that.

DR. FISHMAN: That's true. Your parents can't make you change.

Seeing that both mother and daughter are about to get into an impossible hole, I try to validate the girl's position and relieve the parents. While aligning myself squarely with the parents in applying pressure on the girl, I had to be ready to jump over to her side when needed.

The fact that the daughter fought the parents to the end was a very healthy sign. Although she was going back home, the protest was extremely important. When runaways simply capitulate, one must wonder what they will do next.

The therapy with this family moved to a new stage as the parents learned to amplify their daughter's freedom, so that being home did not justify her fear ;hat she was returning to a prison. I predicted to the parents that at some point their daughter would test them. Indeed, shortly after her return home, she stayed out overnight. She was punished for this offense, and in the ensuing crisis the parents showed that they had learned much about the art of negotiation. A follow-up one year later revealed that Maria did not attempt to live away from home again until she left for college in Chicago—one thousand three hundred miles away—with the blessing of her parents.

Summary

In the course of the therapy these parents had become empowered. When their daughter came home she challenged her parents, but the system withstood the challenge and the girl stayed home until the end of high school. The therapy continued to focus on the family as a caring place where the children had limits and a voice, a place where they could negotiate.

A number of subsequent sessions with the parents addressed their problems of distance from each other. The father stopped his individual therapy and the medication. Eventually the couple became involved in starting a business together.