**Failure to Launch and the Pain of**

**Emotional Dependency**

***A Review of***

*Separation-Individuation Struggles in Adult Life: Leaving Home*

by Sarah Fels Usher

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In 2014 in the United States and in many European Union nations, adults ages 18–34 years

were more likely to live with their parents than a romantic partner, roommate, or on their

own (Fry, 2016). In 2011 in Canada, over 42 percent of adults ages 20–29 years lived with

their parents, while in Japan, the number of 20- to 34-year-olds still at home reached nearly

49 percent (Desilver, 2016). The 2007–2009 Great Recession is often credited for so many

young adults returning to, or remaining in, their family homes. Nevertheless, those living

with their parents are regularly ridiculed. Often described as coddled, they are portrayed as

too immature to attain the typical milestones of adulthood—marriage, mortgage, and

offspring (DeVine & Tucker, 2015). Is there substance to the idea of a generation suffering

from failure to launch, or are they actually victims of circumstance? Furthermore, would

they really be outliers on a developmental spectrum that compared different generations?

In the wake of what Thomas Friedman (2005) called globalization 3.0, shifting economies

and global marketplaces have led to economic hardship rather than opportunity for all ages.

For some young adults, living at home is the only affordable option, while others use the

time to save up for the benchmarks of adulthood expected of them. And still for others, a

deeper psychological meaning can be attached to staying under their parents’ roof.

According to psychoanalyst Sarah Fels Usher, author of *Separation-Individuation Struggles*

*in Adult Life: Leaving Home*, living at home “also seems to indicate a slowing of internal

maturing and separation from parents” (p. ix).

Perhaps too much attention is given to external measures of adulthood and not enough

consideration of the accomplishments that signal psychological maturation. With psyche as

the gauge of advancement, evidence of failure to launch might instead extend anywhere

from ages 20–70 years and include anyone, as Fels Usher observes, who shows “palpable

anxiety and fear about losing their sense of self on a brief visit home” (p. x).

In her psychoanalytic practice, Fels Usher identifies what she calls “failure-to-completely-launch” not in young adults still living at home but in those who have attained the expected

markers of maturity: successful jobs, marriages, homes, even their own children. These

individuals are not like the stereotyped young man living carefree, jobless, and without

expenses in his parents’ basement. On the contrary, Fels Usher witnesses great suffering in

her patients for whom the developmental task of separation-individuation was inadequately

achieved. Their continued emotional dependency on parents, and in some cases a sibling,

can lead to “panic attacks, painful somatic problems, depression, sometimes rage,

difficulties in intimate relationships, and often a pervading sense of hopelessness, for

example, ‘This is my life. I’ll never get free’” (p. ix).

In recent decades, a lot of attention has been given to attachment theory and the quality of

the mother-infant bond, which, although a precursor to secure or not so secure attachment

in adult relationships, only accounts for one of two early life developmental milestones. In

her book, Fels Usher focuses on the equally important task of separation-individuation and

the need to risk leaving the safety of the parent-child bond in order to individuate and

become one’s own person. She applies to adulthood Margaret Mahler’s separation-individuation theory, which, although based on observations of children in the first years of

life, Fels Usher uses to understand why some adults remain emotionally dependent on their

first families to the point that they fail to “feel entitled to their own life” (p. 18). According

to Mahler’s theory, success of the separation-individuation task is marked by the child’s

ability to reject the caregiver, thereby gaining a sense of independence while still knowing

he or she will be loved. This “rapprochement crisis” is a necessary conflict on the way to

individuation, which, when properly resolved, affirms that the young child can be both

independent and loved (p. 14).

In *Separation-Individuation Struggles in Adult Life*, Fels Usher acknowledges the

controversies surrounding her unconventional use of Mahler’s theory while making the case

that, for those unable as children to successfully resolve the rapprochement crisis, as adults

they will still “fear the consequences of leaving home will be the loss of parent’s love” (p.

xi). Even when they move to other cities or marry, they remain plagued with unconscious

guilt, rage, and even hate; they want to be their own person yet fear hurting their parents if

they do finally individuate. Quoting psychiatrist Andrew C. Lotterman, Fels Usher

emphasizes the self-destructive reactions that can result: “A variety of masochistic

outcomes is possible. Primitive and frank self-destructive behaviors such as suicide attempts

. . . [happen]. However, there are more subtle forms of self-deprivation. Sabotaging

success, alienating loved ones, and enduring psychosomatic illness are a few of the many

possibilities. Identification with the suffering of others (such as an unhappy or ill parent) is

another” (p. 31).

Fels Usher shares several causes for failure-to-completely-launch, including needy parents

who may have their own unresolved individuation-separation issues, parents with physical

illnesses or psychological disorders that cause excessive dependency on the child, and the

parents’ earlier traumatic losses, which can impede their ability to support their child’s

healthy separation. When parents use their offspring to satisfy emotional needs not met by

the marriage, children can also be at risk. An unresolved rapprochement crisis may even

result when a newborn sibling distracts a parent from the needed emotional tug-of-war that

confirms both the child’s independence and the constancy of a parent’s love. As a result of

these types of situations, “failure-to-completely-launch patients need permission to be their

own person” (p. 105).

*Separation-Individuation Struggles in Adult Life* is a short—only 112 pages—and highly

readable book divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, Fels Usher gives a balanced

review of psychoanalytic literature on the concept of separation-individuation while also

making her case that the developmental task of separation continues across the life span.

Throughout the rest of the book, she weaves case studies with theoretical interpretations to

identify how her patients have psychologically and relationally compensated for an

unresolved rapprochement crisis. One chapter is devoted to individuals plagued by the need

to separate from their parents, another to couples in which at least one partner prioritizes

the parents’ emotional needs, and a further chapter devoted solely to challenges stemming

from sibling relationships. The chapter on siblings is particularly intriguing, especially given

the dearth of attention to the role of siblings in psychological development. As Fels Usher

writes, “Siblings are our lifelong companions. As such we need to recognize that our

patients’ siblings are not just the supporting cast in the Oedipal drama, but often have

starring roles” (p. 81). She shares an illuminating discussion of how dynamics with siblings

can result in ongoing emotional dependency that is just as debilitating as the failure to

emotionally separate from parents.

*Separation-Individuation Struggles in Adult Life* also includes a chapter on pauses and

breaks in treatment, which Fels Usher discusses as opportunities to identify unresolved

rapprochement crises as well as support patients in gaining greater independence. This

chapter includes a discussion of termination that examines the analyst’s possible reactions

to the end phase of treatment, which Fels Usher suggests mirrors the child’s (patient’s)

efforts to separate-individuate from the parent (analyst). Although insightful, this section

would have benefited from more attention to potential countertransference related to the

analyst’s own failure to completely launch. Nevertheless, the inclusion of this topic brought

the issue of unresolved emotional dependency full circle, which, given Alice Miller’s (1981/

1997) credible assertion that many therapists were themselves parentified as children,

deserves elaboration.

Fels Usher wrote *Separation-Individuation Struggles in Adult Life* for psychoanalysts,

psychoanalytic psychotherapists, and clinical postgraduate students, yet her writing style is

highly accessible, and thus her slim volume would also benefit the psychoanalytically versed

therapist looking for an in-depth psychological interpretation of failure to launch, a topic

increasingly addressed throughout the mental health field. Fels Usher impressively combines

theoretical perspectives of contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers with sensitive portrayals of

her patients’ lives, while also transparently sharing how she works with transference to

achieve best outcomes. In her compassionate regard for her patients’ struggles, she

confirms that throughout the life span, there can be opportunities to ultimately launch and

become one’s own person.

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