

EMBRACE LOSS WHEN KIDS FLY FROM NEST

Peggy Drexler

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Mother's Day was always big at our house. But as the kids have grown, it has lost a little of its luster; more important than Valentine's Day, but not quite Thanksgiving.

My 16-year-old daughter and 30-year-old son love and appreciate me. But there is no doubt it has become a noteworthy holiday. The note being: "Thursday - get Mom a card."

But Mother's Day has changed for me, too. It has become a good time for an emotional check up on my state of readiness for my post-caregiver life. With widely spaced children, the summer of my hands-on responsibilities has been happily extended. I also had some time to process the coming separation by thinking through the moments of the first one.

I remember when my son started taking the public bus in fourth grade. I watched from the front window as he disappeared over the hill with his friends on the way to the bus stop. I was at the same window at the end of the day to watch him reappear. I did that for a year.

In seventh grade, he decided he could no longer sit in the same row with us at the movies. The guys had started calling him "Drex." He was not about to jeopardize a cool nickname by being spotted munching Jujubes with Mom and Dad.

I have also experienced the most definitive act of separation: the day you drop a child off at college. As you turn on to the highway, you know you are leaving something behind that never truly comes back.

He came down with mono, and I did what any good mother would do - I dispatched chicken soup. He thanked me for the soup, but told me his new girlfriend was taking good care of him. I said I was glad to hear that.

Given the time allotted to adjust and my job as a psychologist, you would think I'd have a good answer for how to handle the coming departure of my daughter. I don't.

I've even done some research. Advice runs from hobbies, to charity work, to Prozac, to get over it.

There is new evidence, in fact, that says parents actually adjust to the empty nest more easily than once thought. Having free run of the house again opens the way to stronger relationships, new interests and a new life. Just as children move on, so do we.

But logic and statistics mean little if you feel like a job to which you have dedicated your adult life has been downsized.

My husband and I will have been hands-on parents for more than 30 years - longer than most - by the time our daughter departs for college.

How will we react? Who will we be? What will we do in those spaces once filled by children? Will things be as fun as they are when you get to see them through the eyes of a child?

I don't have the answers. But I think I have a strategy. Diversions won't alter reality and medication just bathes it in illusion.

I think the key is to embrace the pain. Feel the loss. Let in the emptiness. Go into your child's empty room and sit on the bed.

It's as real and as right as your decision to shape their lives in the first place. You are the reason they have straight teeth, good values and bright prospects. This is part of the job you have done to the best of your ability. The joy now is less about the doing, and more about the results. Enjoy your handiwork.

Do I really believe that? I have two years and two more Mother's Days to think about it. Right now, my daughter needs a ride to school.

Peggy Drexler is an assistant professor of psychology at the Weill Cornell Medical School and the author of "Raising Boys Without Men." Contact us at insight@sfchronicle.com.

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