

ESSAY



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Parent's college goodbye is a bittersweet triumph

BY BARBARA MAHANY

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I've been practicing for months. Practicing what it will be like when, in a few weeks, my firstborn is packed up, flown off and settled into a dorm on a campus on a hill in a town some 1,000 miles from the old house where his stirrings have been the backbeat to my every day.

Just to see what it feels like, I find myself walking past the bedroom that's hard off the landing on the way up the stairs. I peek in, see the bedclothes unrumpled, just the way he left them.

Sometimes, if I'm drawn in, I take a few steps beyond the door, look around, breathe deep of what it will be like — when the piles on the desk no longer teeter, when the soggy towels aren't plopped on the floor, when, for months at a time, there's no trace of him in our midst.

My firstborn is headed off to college. And while, for the life of me, I cannot picture this place without him, I know deep down that the whole point of this exercise called parenting is this soon-to-come parting, no matter how hard.

While I might be practicing this new long-distance mothering — imagining what it'll be like to not see the light shining from under his door at 3 in the morning, to not hear his books thump on the counter when he lopes into the house, to not wake at 5 to stir his oatmeal and send him off with a hug — and while I can't even begin to imagine how it will feel to look into his eyes one last time and walk away there on that leafy New England college quad, I do know that the real work started long ago — and for that there was no practice, only sheer trial by error and hope.

For the last 18-plus years, I've been getting him ready for this great divide.

I was cradling that lanky baby in my

arms, back in our city garden one hot Sunday afternoon, when a wise friend of ours, a priest actually, stood in front of a circle of people we love and told my husband and me that we had but one essential job: to give that child roots and wings.

Roots, so he is forever grounded, solid, deep. Wings, so that some day the wind will catch beneath him, and he will soar.

Roots, I've come to learn, are laid down slowly. They're laid down late at night in kitchens, when the tears come, and the stories from the playground break your heart, but you stand there like a sponge, soaking up every drop of the hurt.

They're laid down on long walks where you listen to the boy spill his dreams, and you let out his kite string; you say you believe, and you mean it.

They're laid down after school at the kitchen counter, while you sop up the dramas of the day, listen to the questions and quandaries, and offer up the scant teaspoons of wisdom you have to offer.

They're laid down so when you get to this summer — when your kid packs up, leaves home, steps into the college life for which he is so very hungry — you can stand back and watch what happens.

What you pray for is that while you've been hard at work cultivating those roots, the wings, undetected, began to unfurl.

Oh, sure, you've seen starter flights. The road trip in a car packed with 18-year-olds where you stayed home and held your breath. The lightning storm that hit when he was out on a boat in a river, and somehow he made it back to shore and holed up in a metal boxcar used as a boathouse.

But, so far, the nest he has flown home to was yours, the one you've watched with vigilant eyes.

From here on in, the wings and the flights are all his.

bmahany@tribune.com



Ask Amy

BY AMY DICKINSON

askamy@tribune.com

Husband's surprise isn't thoughtful

Dear Amy: I am a 70-year-old mother and grandmother.

I sit on several committees and boards and enjoy being active in this committee work.

I have committed to chairing fundraisers and co-chairing other events that require planning six months in advance.

A few weeks ago my husband (who is retired) informed me that he has booked us on an overseas trip in the middle of two events that will occur during that time period.

I told him that I would love to go, but I had committed to two fundraisers six months ago and feel that I should honor those commitments.

He became upset and said that going with him is more important.

I know there will be another opportunity in the spring that will allow me to plan ahead, but he said he feels if we don't go now we may never go.

I gave in and am not looking forward to the trip at all because of the burden my absence will place on other people who have to take my place at these events.

I don't want to disappoint him but feel as though he has given me an ultimatum. What should I do?

— *Charitably Inclined*

Dear Inclined: Your husband has completely disregarded your schedule, your social priorities and commitments you have made to organizations you support.

He then manipulated you, delivered an ultimatum and pouted about it.

You could have pushed back or insisted that your husband reschedule this trip, but you capitulated.

Not an auspicious way to start a vacation.

If this behavior is out of character for your husband, you should try to find out what's going on. Is he wrestling with a health issue he hasn't told you about? Is he depressed and lonely?

I suggest you start this conversation by saying, "Honey, your behavior surrounding this trip is surprising. I'm disappointed. Can we talk about what you were thinking and what's going on? And can you agree to always check with me before making plans that take us out of the country?"

Dear Amy: My sister has been extremely nasty lately (it goes in spurts).

She always feels there has been an

injustice to her, and she drags the entire situation out for months — sometimes years — where every encounter is peppered with snide remarks.

Our entire family has to endure this.

I have read your policy on leaving a gathering whenever nasty remarks are made, but I think making a big production by leaving abruptly would just fuel her nastiness, even if I tried to do it gracefully.

Is there any way to shut down the comments and perpetual self-pity without making it worse?

— *Unwilling Participant*

Dear Unwilling: The point of leaving a gathering discreetly (not making a big production) when someone is nasty or abusive is that there is no reliable way to shut down someone else. Instead, you have to tell yourself, "I can't control you. I can only control myself."

Your sister may be struggling with mental health issues (bipolar disorder, for instance). You cannot force her to get help, but you could certainly take the risk of suggesting it, privately, during a time when she is calm.

Dear Amy: "Upset" wrote that some relatives became angry when he or she declined to be tested as a possible kidney donor.

Transplant teams are quite sensitive to such family dynamics.

Anyone in a similar situation can begin testing but confide to one of the team that she doesn't truly wish to donate.

The team will quickly and discreetly find a face-saving medical reason that would prevent the donation.

— *Robert Finn, author of "Organ Transplants: Making the Most of Your Gift of Life" (O'Reilly and Associates, 2000)*

Dear Robert: Thank you for clarifying this issue.

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