



SURVIVING THE EMPTY NEST



YOU WANT YOUR LITTLE BIRDIES TO LEARN TO FLY – BUT YOU FEEL LOST WITHOUT THEM. CHEER UP: IT'S TIME TO REINVENT WHO YOU ARE AND LEARN TO SOAR YOURSELF.

by Leslie Garisto Pfaff

BEFORE I DROPPED MY college-bound only child at the Rhode Island School of Design, I promised myself that I wouldn't let her see me cry. I

kept my promise – barely – waving goodbye as I watched her through a glaze of tears that spilled over as soon as she was out of sight. I continued to cry, sobbing through Rhode Island, weeping as we traveled the leafy byways of Connecticut, dabbing at my eyes over the Tappan Zee Bridge, and finally finding myself all cried out (to the great relief of my husband) as we hit the Garden State Parkway. When we got home, the house seemed eerily quiet; walking past my daughter's

bedroom, I half-expected to find her there, at her desk, playing with the cat as she laughed at something a friend had posted on her Facebook page. Instead, I was met with an empty room, unnaturally tidy except for the jumble of bedding she left behind as we rushed to get on the road the day before.

This was my introduction to the empty nest, as much a state of mind as a locale where I'd have to make sense of this newfound independence – mine, as well as my daughter's – and a wildly mixed bag of emotions, from exhilaration (I'd launched a daughter!) to the deepest sense of loss (I'd launched a daughter). Loss, in fact, is at the very heart of the empty-nest experience – not just of the children

who have left you in the wake of their outstretched wings, but of your sense of identity. *I've been a parent for 18 years*, I remember thinking, *so what am I now?* Ironically, today's empty nesters may feel that loss more acutely than previous generations of parents. "We tend to associate empty-nest syndrome with stay-at-home moms who've made parenting their entire focus, but what I've found is that you can be quite busy with other things and still feel an intense sense of loss," says Clifton psychologist Tamara Shulman. That's because our generation has thrown ourselves into parenting the way we have everything else, with a great (some might say too great) sense of purpose, reading about it, blogging about it, and

wearing it, in general, as a badge of accomplishment.

Women — as a rule are more hands-on than men when it comes to involvement in our kids' lives — tend to suffer the most, but it can hit men with equal force, especially if they're unprepared for it. There's no doubt that it affects marriages. "I remember looking at my husband after both of my sons were gone and thinking, 'Who are you?'" says Celia Nakashian, a special education teacher living in Nutley.

"If certain issues have been buried in a marriage because both parents have focused all their attention on the kids, an empty nest can be a real challenge," notes Richard Horowitz, a relationship coach in Princeton and founder of GrowingGreatRelationships.com. It helps, he says, to be proactive — to prepare yourself for the challenges ahead and to discuss with your spouse what you envision for your future together. But

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even if you've been living in denial (a territory I know all too well), there are plenty of things you can do to soften the bumps in the road as you proceed to the next stage of your life — and maybe even enjoy the trip.

•• **Pat yourself on the back.** You've done a wonderful thing in raising your kids to be secure enough to venture out,

however unsteadily, into the world. "It can be really helpful to focus on your young adults and remind yourself that although it may be a difficult transition — for them as well as for you — they're in the right place to do what they need to do," Shulman says.

•• **Step back.** When my daughter was just starting to look into colleges, someone told me a story about a group of parents whose four kids were all going off to Haverford College in Pennsylvania. The parents got together and rented a house nearby so they could take turns seeing to their children's needs: doing laundry, preparing home-cooked meals, proof-reading papers, and providing emotional support. I can't vouch for the story, but it has the ring of credibility. Our generation, after all, spawned the term "helicopter parent" for our tendency to hover over our kids, instead of letting them skin their knees, fail their algebra tests,



and generally learn by making mistakes. Consider this an opportunity to take a step back and let you and your kids get used to the idea of their independence. That band-aid is going to hurt like heck if you take four years to rip it off.

•• **Redefine your mission.** You don't have to relinquish your goal of being a good parent when your last child flees the nest, though the nature of your parenting is certainly going to change. "I think of a parent's role at this stage as being something like oxygen — you're absolutely essential, but you're background," Shulman says. Being in the background isn't a bad thing: It affords you the time to focus on new goals, or old goals that you've never felt free enough to achieve. "It's helpful — essential, really — to recalibrate your purpose in life," Horowitz says. Maybe you'd like to change jobs, or spend more time volunteering, or

travel with your spouse, or start a blog, or take a class in stand-up comedy. "It's important for adults, at any new life stage, to re-envision who they are and what they want to accomplish," Horowitz stresses.

•• **Work on your marriage.** For some couples, the empty nest represents a genuine problem; for others, it's essentially an opportunity to get reacquainted. If you feel that your relationship is basically sound, start talking about what you both want from this new phase in your life, and make sure you map out what Horowitz calls "both 'we' and 'me' time." You don't need to spend every waking hour together now that the demands of homework and soccer and the college search have receded, but you should consider this an opportunity to recharge the relationship. "It's an especially good time to do something new together," notes

Shulman, whether that's working out at the gym, getting a theater subscription, or taking a cooking class.

•• **Consider reaching out.** If you and your spouse are facing serious problems, marital counseling or relationship coaching can offer perspective and support. And short-term psychotherapy can help if personal sadness about your newly empty nest feels overwhelming. Friends can offer great support, but if they're not at the same stage yet, you'll find support of another kind in the many essays that have been published on the subject. Don't be surprised if they help you feel hopeful, if not outright joyous, about this new life stage — just in time, perhaps, for your kids' decision to move back in with you when college is over. *

Leslie Garisto Pfaff blogs about her experience as an empty nester at dispatchesfromthenest.wordpress.com.



