

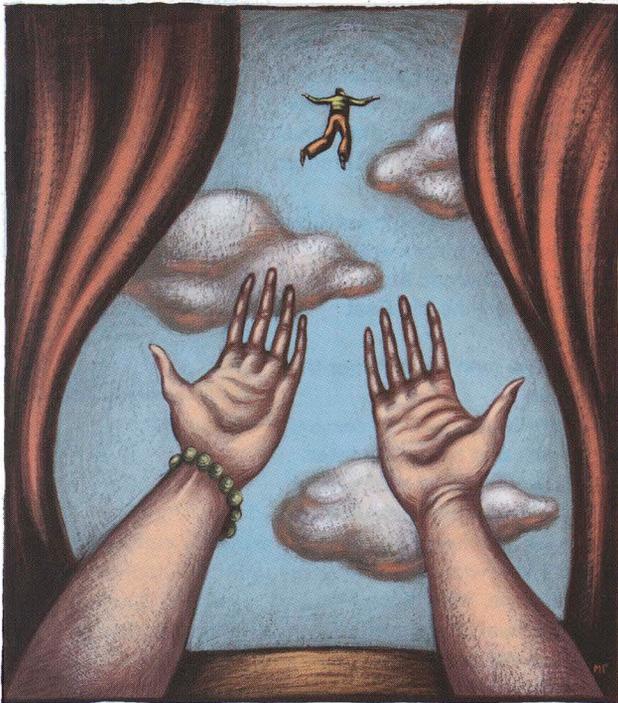


EXTRA CREDIT

Nesting Instincts

Parents should move on when the kids move out.

MICHAEL PRINZO



It's the end of an era."

I'm embarrassed to admit I actually uttered those words the day we left the oldest of my three sons at college. But while melodramatic, the words reverberated with truth. As we drove away, I knew my family had changed irrevocably.

The frequently ridiculed "empty nest syndrome" is far from amusing for the millions of mostly—but not exclusively—women who experience it every year, according to Professor Eleanor Macklin, director of the marriage and family therapy program in the College for Human Development.

"A sociologist coined the phrase 'empty nest' almost 60 years ago, in a time when children were the primary focus of a woman's life," she says. "Today we call it the 'launching stage,' emphasizing getting on with one's life."

Macklin says the pain of separation is not restricted to the time a child leaves for college. Similar emotions can descend on the first day of school, when a child

leaves for summer camp, or on a child's first date.

"How you deal with this stage depends on how you deal with the rest of your life," says Macklin. "The change is harder for some, especially those families who have built their whole lives around the family unit. For them this can be a time of disruption. But for others, it becomes an opportunity to try new roles. They find it exciting."

A child's departure can also affect marriages. "When their first child is born, couples often put their marriage second and become parents, period," Macklin says. "Then when the chil-

dren leave, some find themselves facing each other across the table with nothing to say."

For others, says Macklin, the quality of marriage often improves. "They're at the peak of their careers with money and good health, and post-menopausal women can be sexually active without worry. Husbands and wives rediscover each other as playmates."

For most people, the change in family structure requires some sort of adjustment. Professor Judith Long, a sociologist in the Maxwell School specializing in gender studies, says people can help themselves by preparing for this transition well in advance.

"First, parents have to cut their children a little slack, let them take some risks," says Long. "They must force themselves not to be too protective."

Another key? Do some things to please yourself. "Take up tap dancing again," says Long. "Invest in relationships you've neglected with your peers during the intensive family phase of life. Get a job, or at least start training for one."

Long also suggests paying greater attention to your lifetime partner. "This transition is particularly difficult for traditional families, where men work at their careers and women work at the family. Suddenly the wife finds herself unemployed, while he's probably full tilt in his career."

Long also warns against turning the home into a shrine. "You shouldn't become trustees of all your kids' belongings. Use that space for yourself," she says. Other tips? "Don't call your children every day. Don't involve yourself in their lives too much."

In other words, give your children space to adjust to their new role and new connection to you. "Something no one ever talks about is that children must make a transition also, to adult relationships with their parents," says Long. "Most college students haven't a clue that their parents are people."

Macklin agrees. "The goal is moving into a new state of mutual adult relationships you couldn't have before," she says. "It will prove more satisfying in the long run." —CAROL NORTH SCHMUCKLER