

Of Love, Loss and Basketball

SHE WAS FINE WITH THE EMPTY NEST. UNTIL A STORM MOVED IN.

By Alina Tugend



Photo by Mitch Geiser for unsplash

Every life transition during the childhood years, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, is both celebrated and mourned. Pre-school — the baby is growing up! Kindergarten — she's in real school now! And so it goes from elementary to middle to high school, tremors leading up to the real earthquake—college. In affluent communities like ours, where most teenagers are expected — and do — slip seamlessly from high school to higher education, the joy of a son or daughter getting accepted to a university is almost overshadowed by the sorrow so many parents seem to feel about the end of an era.

To my surprise, however, the most difficult transition, at least for me, came after my older son graduated from college and joined the working world. He lived about four hours away while he was in school and lives about four hours away now. We still talk every Sunday night, as we did while he was a student, and text sometimes in between. So, it shouldn't feel like much has changed.

But it has. College had big breaks. The summers, when he lived at home and interned in Manhattan. Thanksgiving. The slightly-too-long six weeks over the winter holidays. Spring break. Sure, he spent some with friends and trotted off to Berlin for a semester. (OK, we visited him there.)

Now he has only two weeks' vacation for the entire year.

Before, there was always the sense that he was temporarily elsewhere and our house was his permanent home. Because it was.

Oh, he still might come back to New York and live with us for a bit. I was a boomerang child before the term existed, returning home several times in my 20s when I moved from one coast to the other. But that was different. Once I graduated from college, I resented being under my parents' roof and was all about finding a job and getting out. It was not a good time for me or my parents; I'm sure I was charming to be around, as only a surly 20-something can be.

I dreaded my sons' leaving for college, but for me, it was more fear about how they would adjust. Once it was clear they were fine, I was too.

There were moments of sadness, but unlike many of my friends, I didn't experience wholesale devastation. Some told me that they cried for days. One talked about her son leaving as if he had died. Many said they couldn't bear to walk past their child's bedroom, saddened at the emptiness. I, on the other hand, loved seeing the rooms so clean and tidy.

Feeding into this current feeling of loss is that my younger son, a sophomore at college, will not be home this summer because of a promising research job elsewhere. So, this could be the first summer neither boy is here.

I thought about this while shopping, realizing that there's no more need to buy those big bottles of shampoo and body soap for their bathroom, because they probably won't be home long enough to use them up. And that those plays or museum shows I thought would be fun for all of us to go to together — well, the windows to see them as a foursome are getting narrower and narrower.

A few days ago, the basketball hoop that has been in our backyard for almost two decades blew over. It happened once before, when the water that stabilizes it leaked out, but now it seemed like it might have some permanent damage. That hoop had been one of the best investments we ever made as parents. Our sons played with friends and with each other. Neighborhood kids used it even when our boys weren't around, and when my sons came home on those long college breaks, I watched them playing against each other or just lazily shooting hoops alone to decompress, earbuds firmly in place.

My husband and I stared out the window at the fallen giant and then at each other. "Maybe it's time to say good-bye?" he asked.

"No," I said. "The boys love it."

We looked at each other, knowing that maybe it didn't make much sense to try to fix it. But still. These things take time.

"Let's put it back up," I said.