

Alone Again, Naturally

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"You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams." -Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

In looking into "empty nest" I thought that I would find parents contented by a sense of accomplishment having raised their children, comfortable in the transition and rediscovering their own lives and relationships with their spouses. But it was not that straightforward nor, apparently, is the transition quite as quick or smooth. There is, after all, a period of adjustment. It seems we humans are continually confronted with change of one sort or another through these "phases" of our lives, and this one is no different. And change, we all recognize, takes time.

When we first decide to couple, there is the normal getting to know how to share our space with another. As soon as we figure that out, or perhaps sometime before, a little person joins our twosome and before you know it we make the space in our hearts first and then in our lives to include this small addition. It is no problem, really, for we are truly "in love." We have shifted our emotional focus and now it is about the child or children. He, she or they now determine why and how we live. Not only does the original couple take the necessary back seat, at least for a time, but our individual lives do, as they are no longer our own nor will they ever be again in the same fashion it had been before children.

After having lived in this manner for a period of eighteen or more years (with some people living with children for as long as thirty-five years!) one could understand how life gets very settled into a routine, with modifications. Children become interested in different activities and parents support those activities, often with direct involvement. Life becomes about the grades, the games, the lessons and the social events.

You get removed in a way, says Larry, one half of an empty nester for years now. He feels that when a child marries, parents move down one notch, and then another when the child has their own children. Larry says that it is not necessarily a bad thing, just the way it is, but part of what you miss is all the social connections made because of the children and of course, you just miss the daily interaction with them. In the end, he says, "You just adapt and enjoy the grandchildren."

A similar sentiment was echoed by Tim, another empty nester for some years now. "You develop new routines, sometimes you recognize that you have different tastes in say, television programs, and so she watches in the study while you watch TV in the living room." As Tim reflected, I understood what a uniting experience it has to be, even if parents are only forced to be and do together as the children's schedules dictated the activity of the days, weeks and most weekends. "It is different now, for sure," says Tim, "but it is fine. We get to visit the kids and are still involved in their lives," even though their daughters have completed their college education and are on their own.

Indeed all the happily intact families and couples I interviewed indicated that it was difficult to let go. The paradox is that they did all they could to teach their children all they need to make it in the world, to be independent and self-sufficient, and then they were sad when their children finally achieved all that because, as parents, they became less useful. It takes time to appreciate all the "nice things about it," as Larry mentioned, like not having all kinds of schedules to adhere to, etcetera. "Besides, they still need you on occasion for advice," and that keeps parents in the loop.

Bruce and Shelly recently sent their only daughter off to college in Fredonia. After having been gone nearly a year, she has returned home to complete her education locally. It was a tough period of adjustment (at least a one-month timeframe, according to Bruce). All the time she was away they all spoke regularly on the phone and reverted back to their pre-daughter times, going out to dinner more often and "doting on each other." But they missed her the whole time and are only happy to have her home.

"Boomerang" kids, as they are called, may rotate in and out for years, if not decades, altering the household's dynamics. The reasons

include financial pressures as they attempt to pay off debts, jobs that are difficult to find and keep and the fact that these children are getting married later. Today, things like terrorist threats may send kids home,

feeling the need to be nearer to those emotionally close to them In fact, a recent survey estimated that as many as sixty percent of current college students plan to move back home after they graduate, with about twenty percent figuring the stay will last at least one year. Another factor in current times is that protective baby boomer parents want to guide their children to their "passion," and that could take time as this philosophy encourages taking a while for inward reflection.

Still, it is difficult being home again. One man told me that when his daughter, the last of four children to leave, returned home after college. he laid down the rules. He readily acknowledged that he had no idea what went on while she was gone. but in his home, "the rules" still applied. Although she balked a little. they reached an understanding and the young woman took the opportunity to save some money before she got married. "Actually, she was a lot of help to us, and it kept us occupied (with stories of her life) and happy." Today he is content, offering that "Family has become very important to me." He explained that despite his less than fulfilling marriage, he enjoys all the grandchildren and loves that his children are all emotionally and geographically close.

In the end, like so many things in life, it depends on how you view it. Change often feels bad because it reflects an attachment to the past and "if it was good," as Larry mentioned in our interview, "you have a tendency to want it to stay that way." It is disorienting to change emotional focus. If, on the other hand, you perceive the move away from how it was to the way it could be, then you transform your view to opening up to the possibilities that abound. Like retiring, if you have well prepared yourself by cultivating hobbies and interests beyond your `work,' then when the time arrives you will take on the change as an opportunity to pursue those interests. If you have not prepared-having been so engrossed in the job at hand-you will be left feeling empty, perhaps even useless upon retirement. Since we cannot hope to change circumstances-they are as they are-we can only change how we see something. Changing our perception is the option that is open to everyone in this position as it is completely within the control of each individual to make and remake their lives starting any moment they choose.

"...Which father, which teacher, could prevent him from living his own life, from soiling himself with life, from loading himself with sin, from swallowing the bitter drink himself, from finding his own path? ...But if you were to die ten times for him, you would not alter his destiny in the slightest."

-Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

With over fifteen years of experience in counseling, Dolah Saleh is also the author of Dating and the Pursuit of Happiness (available at www.amazon.com).