

WELL DONE, THOU GOOD AND FAITHFUL PARENT

It's hard to know when you should stop being a parent and start being a friend.

By Dean Merrill

The nice thing about retiring from Sears or Southwestern Bell is that they let you know when you can quit. They take you out to lunch, make speeches, and present you with a wrapped gift. The next Monday you don't show up.

The crazy thing about parenting is that it has no such finale. We put in our twenty or twenty-five years, making transitions all along the way, but it doesn't end with a bang. Instead, we whimper. Am I through yet? Shouldn't I go ahead and handle this problem? I can't let *that* happen. . . .

Parenting, like war, is a lot easier to get into than get out of, and the gradual release of what has been a consuming responsibility puts millions of couples on edge. While some offspring leave for an out-of-state college, more seem to be sticking around these days, either to study nearby or to work. Even a wedding doesn't guarantee a new era, not with spiraling divorce rates often driving shattered partners back to the one safe nest they have known.

"This year is the most difficult time of my life," confesses one mother of three as her youngest daughter prepares for marriage this

summer. "I'm in the transition from mother to friend—and friends don't force advice. They wait until they're asked. There's so much sorting out to do."

Smaller issues can generate tension and anxiety as well, and parents whose offspring are at a distance are often plagued by what they *don't* know. Says Mary, who's sent three of five children to college so far, "You've known almost every breath they breathe, and suddenly—nothing. They're gone two and a half months at a crack. The weekly phone call doesn't tell you a great deal, and although I'm a great letter writer, I'm not a letter receiver, at least from my kids.

"Young people often think of *their* adjustment when they move out. They don't think very much about ours."

The relative peace and quiet is a joy—for about two weeks. Then mothers begin to realize they've lost more than noise and laundry; they've also lost a great deal of control. For better or worse, the results of one's parenting are about to be announced to the world.

"The hardest part of all," says Carole, another mother of five, "is dealing with 'What if they make a major decision without my input?'"

Our children have always asked what Bill and I thought—we've worked through these things together. Now I have to find out how they'll decide without us.

"For example, we've always camped as a family—they've learned to love it from us. Now comes the question of their going off with friends on extended camping trips. Morality is not the issue, but it seems so to them when we hesitate for other reasons. We've ended up saying, 'We don't give you our blessing, but we do give you the right to choose.' And they've gone ahead with the trips.

"And—I have to admit—things have turned out all right."

For other women, pure nostalgia is a hurdle. "I've kept their rooms the same," confesses a college mother, interviewed by psychologists Joel and Lois Davitz in their book *Making it From Forty to Fifty*. "Scrapbooks, records, books are all on the shelves.

"The other day I was cleaning the shelves, and I dropped one of the model airplanes, and a wing fell off. I spent an hour trying to glue pieces back together. My son hasn't looked at that airplane in years. Yet I can't bring myself to throw it away. . . .

"God knows, there were times I

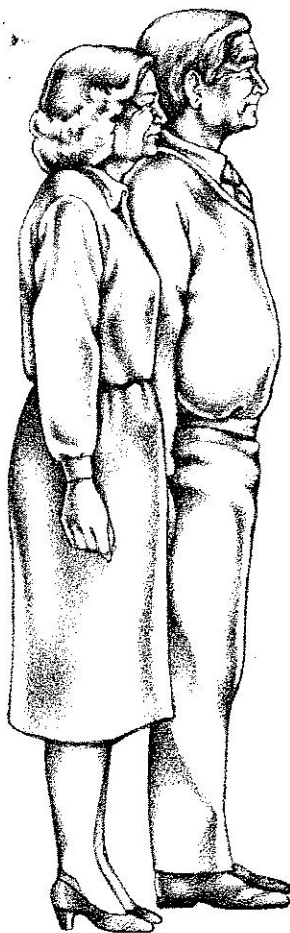
would say to myself if only I could have a whole day without any lists. And then the day comes, and they're not around, and I miss them."

When they do return, whether for a brief Christmas vacation or an indefinite visit, both sides fumble for new ways to relate. Even faint echoes of the past prove treacherous. "What drives my daughter wild," says one woman, "is when she's heading out to work in the morning and I say, 'Uh, don't you think you might need a coat today?'"

What is going on in households from one coast to the other, is the tortuous journey through four stages of parent/child life.

1. *Dependence*—the young child needs the parent for survival.

Finishing out the task of parenting is thus a matter of trust... long-term stability comes from submission to the King.



2. *Independence*—the growing child is establishing personhood apart from those who have nurtured him or her.

3. *Interdependence*—the child grown to adulthood is secure enough to be something of a peer/friend to the parent.

4. *Reverse dependence*—the aging parent needs the middle-aged son or daughter for emotional and sometimes physical survival.

Some people, however, stall along the way, never making it to stage four or even stage three. The war to attain stage two may last for fifty years, leaving both sides bitter and exhausted.

When both sides realize, however, that the changes are divinely ordained and decide to cooperate, family health results. Such a model helps especially in the 1980s, when more young people reaching for independence are doing so at home. "The rise of junior colleges in this country has generated a great deal of tension," Jay Kesler commented on one of his "Family Forum" broadcasts. "When your kid is 600 miles away at Ohio State, you can't see what he's doing, and you assume he's diligently studying at the library every evening. But when he's living at home as a commuter student, you see all the messing around, and your parenting instincts keep right on functioning as if he were still in high school."

The economic squeeze is also keeping the young at home longer even after college. America laughed at the independence struggles of "All in the Family," when two strong-willed generations tried to share a roof, but as Purdue psychologist Clifford Swensen acknowledges, "The average house can't be big enough to contain different lifestyles." Transition inevitably leads offspring to spring off, or as the Bible puts it, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother" (Gen. 2:24).

Dennis Guernsey, associate professor of marriage and family ministries at Fuller Theological Seminary, calls this time of life the "Between Families" stage. In his book *A New Design for Family Ministry*, he outlines seven tasks the young single (eighteen to thirty) faces.

1. *Differentiate oneself from the family of origin.* "Part of becoming a responsible adult is the decision to

take charge of one's own life and the relationships with the people in it. That involves the relationship with God as well." Those who fail at this task, says Guernsey, either "become disengaged (unplugged from parents altogether) or "stay enmeshed" (cling to the family of origin). An example of the first case is the prodigal son of Luke 15; the second is the elder brother.

2. *Learn the skills of intimacy.* "Intimacy is neither a by-product of the marriage license nor of the wedding night. It is a learned skill that... begins with learning to relate to your father and mother and your brothers and sisters as friends and equals rather than as authority figures and enemies."

3. *Learn financial independence*—"a task too important to wait until after marriage."

4. *Learn functional independence*—the domestic necessities of living.

5. *Develop strategies for occupational choice.* "The place to find help for such decisions is in the church among people who are supportive, loving, and understand what is meant by 'the will of God.'"

6. *Prepare for marriage.* "Most people get married. Even those who do not usually plan to marry. The young adult in today's world must learn to shop wisely."

7. *Look to the future.* "Many of us moved through our young-adult years without a goal. We just lived from day to day, later to find out we wasted a great deal of time and money before we got on track... A plan is good even if it is changed."

Such an agenda is seen with great clarity by some (but not all) parents and some (but not all) offspring. Efforts by one generation to enlighten the other are not always successful. That's why the best all-around counsel, compressed to a motto, is "Pray more, preach less."

What parents cannot communicate, third parties often can—pastors, counselors, and peers. Sometimes the most convincing voice of all is experience.

"Our daughter never did save money very well," says Diane. "Then she got engaged—and all of a sudden, in the past five months, she and Dave have paid for all their furniture and have put away an additional \$3,000 between them."

A young man named Tod had dreamed through high school and

to college of owning a Charger. "We'd taught him to be independent, to think for himself, and to lay out the pros and cons," says his mother. "So we waited to see what would happen."

What happened was that the son ignored the warning lights and pushed ahead for his car regardless. "Jerry and I sat down one night," the mother recalls, "and said to each other, 'OK—what's the worst thing that could happen to him if he goes ahead?' We realized the only consequences would be financial. So we didn't intervene."

"Well, he fulfilled his dream. His hot car lasted only a year, and the whole episode cost him tremendously. But he learned."

In other situations, however, when parents stand to get stung as well, they must speak up firmly but calmly. A family psychotherapist named Phoebe Prosky talks about when a grown child moves back home again. "Parents should be clear from the outset about their expectations. A good way to begin is to make a list of all the things they would expect of a boarder, or a guest."

Mary's husband, Tom, did that when the oldest daughter returned after four years of college to begin work in a brokerage firm. "Take a few months to get some cash together, buy some clothes," he said in June, "but come October 1, you start paying room and board."

The next younger sibling, who happened to be listening, was astounded. "What is this?" he asked. "On September 30 she's the same kid as always, but on October 1 she has to pay rent?"

"That's right," said Dad with a twinkle in his eye. "She's got to join the real world sometime. That's why I'm giving four months' notice."

The mother in this family adds, "You don't treat a five-year-old like you would a two-year-old, obviously. The same holds true for twenty-year-olds and seventeen-year-olds." Many parents who conscientiously kept pace with the stages of early childhood bring grief upon themselves by failing to adjust once the teen years begin.

What about the child who returns home not for convenience or economy but because his life is a shambles? In *The Not-So-Empty Nest*

is the story of a young statistician named Sara who was climbing fast in her career and had already earned a master's degree before she crashed at the age of twenty-five. Her husband announced he didn't love her anymore. After the divorce, she turned suddenly promiscuous. "I felt compelled to prove I was a woman a man would want," she said.

"The night she climbed into the back seat of a car with a pickup from a singles bar was the night she fled home. To sleepy-eyed, astonished parents, Sara had the presence of mind to say, 'I lost my key. I'm locked out of my apartment.' Later in the week, she broke her lease and moved into the room she had occupied as a girl. 'I told my folks, 'I need home. That's all I know. I need home.' They asked no questions and let me stay."

"As time passed, I realized why I had come home. I had needed to spend time in a familiar place. I had come back to the place where I had learned self-restraint. At home I would be able to check my impulses until all the inner turmoil died. And I didn't consider myself less of an adult for running home. It was a temporary stay."

As one family agency director says, "The promiscuous divorcee or anyone driven to excess who returns home is imploring, 'Parents, control me. I can't control myself.'"

That may not be an easy task. The supplications of the first week may give way to insolence. But it's almost never wise to evict a child. Says Atlanta psychiatrist Alfred Messer, "You never throw an adolescent out on his own. If you cannot control him, arrange for him to go some place where he can be controlled."

The most effective control is that which the child accepts because he or she is a child of God. Long-term stability comes from submission to the King. "If I had it to do over," says Carole, "I'd counsel my kids more from my walk with the Lord than from the top of my head. People try to hold back too much when their children get into high school and college; they don't sensitively inject the Scripture's wisdom where it fits. Those spots are not always easy to recognize, I admit, but they can be turning points."

Finishing out the task of raising a

son or daughter is thus a matter of trust. "Oddly enough, if you're a Christian parent," says another mother, "you don't totally let go. You let your child go to the Lord. The child is not out there in the big world all alone."

This woman has had to prove her words with a daughter who developed anorexia nervosa. "At first, I fought it mightily," she admits. "No child of mine was going to have that! I only made everyone uptight."

"The thought of sending her away to college was almost unbearable. I was sure her eating would dwindle even further."

"Through it all, I had to relearn lessons I thought I had already learned—that I cannot lick problems alone, that I must release them to the Lord and let him fight them. She went away to school; I could only pray and try not to worry—and the truth is, she's making gradual progress. I'm turning loose, and the One who will care for her the rest of her life is taking over." **TCW**

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