

Motherhood is sometimes about enjoying their flight

By Deirdre Galvin

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Walking on a country road in Bloomsburg recently, my friend and I stopped not to enjoy the view but rather to take out our phones and share pictures of our children and a conversation about them.

Typical for two moms out for a walk, right? Except these photos were not of cute toddlers or grade school kids – our sons and daughter are in their 20s and 30s. In one, my son is dressed in a suit for his best friend's wedding and in another, one of her sons is shown hiking near his home in Colorado.

It struck me at the time that, although our kids are no longer children, we still love an opportunity to show them off and they are still the centers of our universe. To us, they are definitely still cute!

In some ways, nothing has changed for us as mothers. We still hurt when they hurt, feel joy when they do, marvel in their uniqueness, and hope they are getting along with their peers.

In other ways, however, everything has changed. We do not see or even hear from them every day. We do not always know when they have met someone new. We have no say in what they eat, what time they go to bed, or what they wear for a special occasion.

We try to take these changes in stride, though at times it seems we are not adjusting at all, even after years of practice.

When I talk to a younger, newer mother, she often doesn't want to hear about this incomprehensible future time when her role will be so altered. I tell her to enjoy now, while she can still walk into the next room and see that her child is safe.

Young parents may look forward to having their children leave the nest. All that freedom, of course. But once there, most of us struggle. It is the natural course of events, and yes we want our kids to leave, and thrive, even in a far-away place. That doesn't mean it's always easy.

The truth is, we mothers will always be "mama bears" to our offspring – from that first awe-inspiring day right through their school years and into adulthood. Our instinct is to protect and defend them. This becomes a problem when they are out there in the world. We're not allowed to follow them, of course, since this is their journey, so we hold our breath and let them go.

There are some ways we can adapt. When my older child left for college, one of my sisters told me to get a better phone and learn how to text. This turned out to be the best empty nest advice ever. Millennials text far more often than they call, and do not listen to voicemails. (Most don't use Facebook either, or emails – they are "talking" to each other on Instagram or Snapchat.)

Learning to let go is part of the role we have to fulfill as parents. But we let go in a way that keeps them with us. We think about them, worry about them, root for them, and give advice when they ask.

As our kids grow, we tend to understand our own parents more. For me, that has meant more frequent phone calls to my own mother, who lives in Massachusetts. One day it occurred to me how important

(even vital) the texts from my kids are, and by extension realized my mother most certainly felt the same about calls from her kids.

There's a well-known saying that, "If you love someone, set them free. If they come back they're yours. If they don't they never were." Speaking of motherhood, these words seem untrue. If your kid leaves the nest and does not come back (except to visit), it could be that he or she found a place and a purpose somewhere else.

My 23-year-old daughter has lived in several cities since leaving home for college. At a young age, she already has realized that New York City is a place that suits her temperament and need for diversity of people and experiences. My 26-year-old son is finding so far that Pittsburgh is ideal for him, after living in New England for college.

Two summers ago, my son travelled to Santa Fe for an internship. I have been accused of texting way too often to check on my kids' well-being. That summer, though, he seemed to be in a great situation, enjoying himself and exploring the area. One day, I called him while he was out on a hiking adventure. "Sorry Mom, I can't talk right now," he said. "I'm on my way up a mountain."

That was a beautiful moment. I didn't need to talk either, because I had heard exactly what I needed to hear. My son was more than o.k., and in that moment it came to me – what I want more than anything is for my children to be in a good place, even if that place is not next to me.

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