

The Nest Empties, But the Lessons Last a Lifetime

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I thought this would be the easy part.

My stepdaughter is a newly minted high school graduate. She has Instagrammed the dazzling photos from her final prom, purchased a sweat shirt emblazoned with the logo of the college she will attend, and survived the anxiety-ridden gauntlet of tests and tribulations that define senior year.

With all of these milestones marking the bridge between home and away complete, I naively thought we'd be spending the summer having breezy conversations about what activities she might explore at college, how she would divvy up the dorm room essentials with her new roommate, and what color schemes they were considering.

But between the moment she was handed her high school diploma and the moment four weeks and three days from now (but who's counting) when she leaves for school, one of us seems to be enjoying her summer while the other one is cramming for a final exam she didn't know she had to take.

This is not a test of my ability to live without her. It's not empty-nest syndrome—the grief that some parents feel when their last child leaves home. One peek at her bedroom floor reminds me that the nest is still quite full, and as of yet, I don't feel sad. Instead, this is my last chance to be a perfect parent—to at least attempt to impart all the parenting tips and lessons that our frantic schedules or my just plain laziness prevented during her growing up years, and I'm desperate not to get a failing grade.

Before my job description changes from the daily coparenting of a growing child to coparenting a budding adult from afar, I'm pulled to evaluate my past performance and am wondering if I've done enough to earn a diploma myself.

I'm up all night reading books on parenting through the teenage years and taking stock: Did I give her too few chores, too many activities? Was I too nosy about her friendships, not nosy enough? And cute as he was, should I have encouraged her to date more boys rather than cocoon with one for a year and a half?

So many times this past year I held my tongue when she was in the midst of studying, play practice, or volunteering—it seemed cruel to remind her of table manners when I was just glad she was sitting down to eat. But now I think this is my last chance to remind her that the back of her wrist is not a napkin. Or that she should take a sweater to the movie because the AC is always cranked too high. And she really should get cracking on her college summer reading assignment—“hard before easy” works for me.

I'm tempted to stuff all of my put-off parenting lessons into her the way she stuffs every bit of her laundry into the washing machine (which reminds me, I've got to tell her to stop doing that; it'll break the machine—oh, and I also have to remind her to separate whites and darks).

Though with time so short, how would I be able to avoid talking to her in clichés before she sets sail for her grand adventure? I want to tell her:

- Boys are lovely. Boys with beer, not so much.
- Be as interested in others as they are in you.
- Get to know your teachers. Get to know yourself.
- Handwritten thank-you notes are always in style.
- Life is better (though not always easier) when you take responsibility.
- Try on people and experiences the way you tried on prom dresses.
- Your body is a gift—don't share it with anyone who hasn't earned it.

Perhaps I should just confess my failings to fully prepare her for the larger world...or just hope she didn't notice. For in reality, with two summer jobs and an active social life, she's as busy as ever. So, I continue to hold my tongue. Most of the time.

It's probably not a coincidence that this past weekend, for the first time, I bought two backyard bird feeders, one in the shape of a cozy cottage. I peppered the eager-to-please saleswoman with questions about how to create a sustainable and nourishing habitat—a sanctuary that the birds would feel comfortable feeding from and want to return to.

Later that day, after my husband assembled the feeders, I sat on my patio and wistfully watched the birds noisily eat, mingle, fly away, and come back. And then it dawned on me that maybe what I really need to do is put down this masochistic test and just give myself an A for effort. After all, why should I spend the precious time we do have together bombarding her with lessons rather than enjoying her. Does my stepdaughter have it all figured out? No, but neither did I at her age. I still don't.