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Leave the nest and soar

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LEAVING home to go on to higher education may be, for both parent and child, a stimulus to reach for the tissues or the champagne.

My memory of leaving the nest enjoys all of the drama and high emotion that we expect from a rite of passage. My mother and I lugged the boxes and bags up to my new room, which was in a vile, ugly concrete block. "At least when you're inside it you won't have to look at it," my mother pointed out.

Then we met Brendan, an old family friend, for lunch. "Are you looking forward to starting university?" he asked me kindly. To his bewilderment, I burst into tears. Throughout the first course, my tears over-seasoned and diluted the soup while Brendan politely affected not to notice. The main course arrived. I wept through that as well. "Your pillowcase is going to be completely sodden by morning," fretted my mother. "Did you pack a spare?"

Of course it is a worrying time for parents, too. Back in the dismal room, my mother gave me an expensive phone card, which she reminded me not to lose, and a block of cheese the size of a brick. Then from her handbag she pulled a postcard, pre-stamped and addressed to her. "Tomorrow, tick a box and post it back," she told me. The tick box postcard was the first of many prompts for brief but pertinent information about my welfare. This one offered four choices of mental state: "Happy. All right. Homesick. Catching the next train home." A second, sent a few weeks into term when I was too enraptured with university life to write or call, said simply, "Yes, I am still alive."

And before my final exams, more cheese arrived, along with a postcard for each of the seven exams, with options ranging from "Yes, I was brilliant!" to "Sunk in gloom".

Although farewells may be damp and anxious occasions, the transition of the child to a semi-independent existence is, Boston sociologist David Karp and colleagues found from their study of 30 families, an eagerly awaited moment on both sides.

Parents spoke of the moment marking the culmination of their parenting efforts.

"I often think of my kids as missiles or rockets. They've cleared the tower when they're accepted to college. They're off and flying," one father put it. And while the empty nest is often assumed to be a depressed and lonely place, particularly for mothers, it's actually a time when midlife women can and do unfurl their own wings again, to their great satisfaction.

Many couples also looked forward to a golden period in their marriages, a hope borne out by research showing that marital satisfaction nosedives with the arrival of children, then exhaustedly clambers upwards again once they leave.

As for the young person who is leaving, there is an extraordinary time ahead.

Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has dubbed the years from 18 to 25 a time of "emerging adulthood".

The predictable routine and dependency of adolescence has been left behind, yet the stabilising responsibilities of young adulthood (such as an established career, marriage, and small children) do not yet hold the young person to any particular role, place or world view. It is "a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain (and) the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater than it will be at any other period of the life course".

This is where it has all been heading, that long, slow unravelling of the apron strings that started way back in the nursery. "Who are we going to see today?" my three-year-old son asks most mornings. At playgroup I hear preschoolers inviting other children around for dinner as the initial, passionate focus on parents begins to dim.

When the time comes for my small son to set off for school, lunch and hat in hand, I know the questions I will be asking myself. What is he doing? Is he making friends? Is he happy, all right or homesick?

No parent forgets the extraordinary upheaval that accompanies a child's birth. All of the small departures that follow prepare for something that may be no less emotionally disruptive: the real, final letting go. So when it happens, bring out the champagne, but don't forget the tissues.

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