



If Only Children Did Not Grow Up

by Saralee Perel

For parents who watch their children grow and pass countless varieties of milestones, the sentiment is both bitter and sweet. One milestone is college.

In September, many children leave home for the first time. I can't fathom how parents go through this without falling apart. I'll never forget that powerful autumn when my favorite little girl went away to college. I fell to pieces.

She was an author who was under my wing as I helped her find her path in the world of writing. I'm finally admitting to myself that she never needed me in the first place. She thought she did. I thought she did. I cherished my role as her mentor. I loved our back and forths about this word or that. Eventually our connection touched on more topics than just writing.

In my heart, I thought of her as the child I never had. Oh heck; I'll just say it. I loved her.

Once, when she asked for my guidance on a beautiful essay, I made a decision without telling her. I didn't examine every single word, comma and period like I would usually do with the meticulous precision of a mental microscope. Instead, I just glanced at it briefly, didn't change anything, and thought, "Let's see how she does on her own."

She did great.

Later, while sitting on the couch with my husband, Bob, I told him I was grief-stricken. "She doesn't need me anymore."

"That's wonderful."

"But I don't want to let her go."

"You know it's best for her."

I remember how heart-wrenching it was for my mother during the fall when I first went to college. I so wish I hadn't waited until after her death to find the compassion I should have found back then.

But I guess most teenagers are self-absorbed and excited about leaving home. I have to believe that or I'll never forgive myself for never even asking about her feelings of loss.

Mom and I were at a shop buying stunning outfits for me. As we stood at the counter to pay, she began crying. The clerk asked what was wrong. My mother tried to stop her tears, but she couldn't. She managed to get out the words, "My little girl is going away to college."

The woman touched her hand and said something like, "I went through it too." I couldn't understand the depth of my mom's grief. But now, when I think of my little writer "daughter" friend being on her own, I do understand my mother's sadness ... completely and fully.

When I came home on school breaks, I couldn't wait to go back – to be with my friends and away from my parents' control. I didn't realize I was whistling when Mom sadly said, "You always whistle the night before you're leaving home."

I didn't mean to break her heart. I wish I hadn't.

So how does a parent deal with a child who's growing up and away? There must be a way of coming out on the other side of this phase in a positive fashion. When I was a practicing therapist, I learned a seemingly odd truth: We can feel entirely conflicting emotions at the very same moment. And we need to accept them equally.

My young writer's mom, Caroline, was my dear friend. Her sadness was different from mine. When I asked how she felt about her daughter leaving for college, she said, "I have so many mixed feelings. I'm immensely proud of her; how smart and talented she is; how confident she is about going and making something of herself." But then, with tears forming, she said, "I worry about her safety in a big city. I worry about something happening to her and me not being able to get there in time to help her."

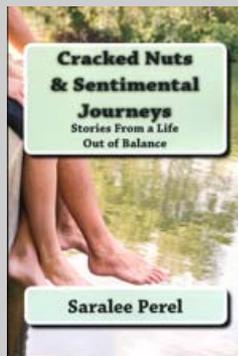
She started to cry and then said what I now know is a universal truth, "I want her to go and I don't want her to go."

My brilliant little girl will do magnificently on her own. This fills my heart with joy. And that will never change.

But at the very same time, I so wish she still needed me.

And ... I guess I always will.

Saralee Perel is an award-winning nationally syndicated columnist. Her new book, *Cracked Nuts & Sentimental Journeys: Stories From a Life Out of Balance*, is available in local bookstores.



It can also be ordered through Amazon, or directly from the publisher, as well as from Saralee for a personalized signed copy.

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Her novel, [Raw Nerves](#), is now available as a paperback and an e-book on Amazon.

