Family Matters

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Relearning Parenthood: When Children Reach Adulthood, What Then?

By Sharon Saline

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I live in an open nest. It's not an empty one, but some days it sure feels that way. The rooms are tidy and still. Things stay just where I place them: the dirty glass in the sink, the jeans drying over the bannister, the bag of walnuts on the counter. My husband goes to work most days at a nearby hospital, offering solace to people who pass from this world to the next and to their loved ones who remain. My beloved Jasper, a golden retriever of incomparable sweetness and light, lies newly buried in my backyard, next to Tucker, the four-legged brother he barely knew. I work too much, trying to make a difference by helping others lead healthier, more emotionally satisfying lives. Sometimes, the silence in the house is deafening. Sometimes, I feel ecstatic. On bad days, I can't seem to find myself or know where I belong.

My children are grown. My son, 25, lives in the Midwest with his girlfriend and their new puppy. My daughter, 21, is still in college nearby us in Massachusetts. When my son returns home for Thanksgiving, wearing rolled-up jeans and sporting a beard like Rasputin, he greets us with an earnest smile and big bear hugs. "That was a brutal, 12-hour drive," he says. "But it's good to see you both." My heart wants to leap into his. My big boy, home.

Then he looks over at the kitchen table, carefully set and ready to receive the special vegetarian meal I'd prepared just for him. "Hey, you got new placemats? What happened to the old ones? They seemed fine."

My face flushes, and I hold my breath. Did I do something wrong by wanting to cheer the place up with something new and colorful? You never can tell with my millennial: he's opposed to frivolous purchases and unnecessary "materialism." He opens the refrigerator. "Wow, there's a lot of food here," he mutters.

I exhale, happy again.

Later, just as the lentil curry is being served, my daughter waltzes in, dragging an enormous duffle bag that could've easily contained a small person. More hugs and greetings, followed by "I've got laundry, lots of it. Is the washer empty?" Off she runs upstairs. The rest of us dig in. It takes her 20 minutes to sort the contents of the body bag and start her first load. No matter. I reheat her stew quickly, as peals of laughter and the chirp, chirp, chirp of snappy conversations turn our meal into a feast. The kids' electricity has brightened the whole house. Over dessert, my daughter tries to explain queer theory to her uncle and my 80-year-old mother. The elders are perplexed and amused. After she leaves to go out to a local bar with some high school pals, my mom turns to me and exclaims, "What the fuck was she talking about?" We laugh easily. The kids are home, the extended family has reunited, and the nest is full. I feel content.

But am I? In addition to the familiar edges, there are new ones, now—unfamiliar, sharp corners where we bump into each other. When my son is Skyping with his former roommate, who now lives in Beijing, I whisper, "Send him my love."

"My mom just told me that she's in love with you!" he says.

Why so snarky?

Another time, my daughter calls me at 11 p.m. "I'm calling because you asked me to, but I'm really tired," she says. "And, yes, I'm alive, but I don't want to talk. I want to get credit for this call though, and will you contribute to buying my face cream? I'm all out."

Oy.

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Minefields are everywhere. Instead of putting on my Teflon armor, deactivating the bombs and letting things slide, I find myself taking things too personally, wearing my emotions on my sleeve, and lashing out when I'm angry and hurt. Then I'm filled with shame and guilt. It's a cycle I learned from my family of origin, and despite years of working on my reactivity, it still emerges.

down by my dietary restrictions (I'm gluten free and cow-dairy free), I struggled to find something that would both satisfy my hunger and bypass gastrointestinal tragedy.

After asking the waiter about the menu and wondering whether they could make my salad without the pita chips, my kids complained loudly to my husband: "Doesn't she have any cultural sensitivity?" "She doesn't have to be gluten free all the time." They looked at each other and groaned. My husband gazed down at his plate. It was as if I weren't there.

I fell right down the old shame spiral and began questioning myself. On the one hand, why couldn't I just pick off the damn pieces of bread? But on the other hand, why do they have to act like such jerks? And why do I have to tolerate it? My indignation prevailed. "You're both so judgmental and cruel," I blurted. "I really hate being a part of this family sometimes." I aggressively pushed back my chair and went to the bathroom to wash my hands and dry my tears. Ugh. *Good job acting your age and taking the high road,* I chided myself in the mirror.

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Turns out, I don't know how to navigate this open nest. I'd finally, mostly, figured out my kids' adolescence. I'd come to understand the teenage angst, the push-me-pull-you skirmishes of the dance of separation, the "I hate yous" mixed with the "OMG, thanks so much for driving me and my friends into town," and the late-night heart-to-heart talks when I needed toothpicks to keep my eyes open but wouldn't leave for anything in the world.

This phase of parenting is something new altogether. The guidelines shift constantly, and I can't keep up. One month, it's "Keep your opinions to yourself (no matter how stupidly I'm behaving) because I'm a fully grown adult and didn't ask you." The next, it's "Why didn't you offer to help me when you saw I was struggling, even though I'm a fully grown adult?"

enough mother and not repeat this pattern of insecure striving with my kids.

I know my kids are figuring out who they are, who they want to be, what they believe, and how to create lives that are meaningful to them. They love me, but I'm simply not as relevant to them as I once was. It hurts, but I try to focus on the fact they come home often. They expect a full refrigerator, dinners with their favorite dishes, and chatting on the couch while watching a movie. They thank me for a good visit with a big hug, but they don't clean up their rooms before they leave. They're still connected to me, but it feels a lot different from when they actually lived here.

Although I know my son is thinking more seriously about the course of his professional life and how to explore his interests in sociology and political justice, he bristles whenever I broach the topic, so I refrain from asking about it. But on a recent Zoom call, he told me, "I'm not sure I want to go into debt for grad school when I'm not sure about what I want to do."

I dove into problem-solving mode: "What about loans, assistantships, grants, scholarships?"

He went silent, and his face got red. "I don't need your suggestions about my life," he blurted and abruptly ended our call.

I soon realized that I'd responded to the wrong thing: money, rather than his feelings of uncertainty. Damn. I reined in an urge to call him right back, paused, and wrote an apologetic email. He sent a gracious note the next day, and it was over.

My instinct to problem-solve gets activated with my daughter, too. When she's overwhelmed and stressed about her courses, I offer suggestions about how to manage her time more effectively. She recoils. All she really wants is for me to listen and acknowledge her struggles. *Got it.*

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The fact is, I'm not comfortable with my adult kids being uncomfortable. Being present for them without giving advice isn't natural for me. If I'm not the problem-solver, the provider of tissues and band-aids, then what am I?

what's next for their lives.

How simultaneously odd and wonderful. I close my eyes and allow myself, just for a second, to picture a future Thanksgiving when we'll all gather around the table again. I'll fill the fridge with my kids' favorite foods, but I'll also buy new placemats if I want. I'll listen to stories of my kids' inevitable stumbles through life, but I know I'll also hear their laughter. I'll hear their periodic judgments of me, and I may get testy. But I'll know we're all adults who, in spite of it all, rejoice in each other's company and love each other for who we are—and who we try to be.

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***Sharon Saline, PsyD**, is a licensed clinical psychologist and the author of* What Your ADHD Child Wishes You Knew: Working Together to Empower Kids for Success in School and Life *and* The ADHD Solution *card deck. She specializes in working with neurodiverse clients. A part-time lecturer at the Smith College School for Social Work, she hosts a weekly Facebook Live event for ADDitudemag.com. Contact: drsharonsaline.com.*

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this is lovely and put words to what I'm currently going through with my own adult and approaching adulthood children