

A Mother's Reflections at Fifty-Something

The empty nest is vastly underrated. It is cushy, cozy, liberating, a place which provides many rooms of one's own. When the children go, perhaps the quiet brings on a kind of loneliness. But after a bit, the silences speak. One can hear many voices, the voices of one's self, one's life, one's possibilities, the souls left unfulfilled by the decision to commit to a life of child rearing. The lives one might have lived are not just fantasies. All around, nieces and nephews, sons and daughters are making the choices of freedom and adventure, not marriage and offspring.

It is well those strangers in the house leave, those strangers born of one's own body, those strangers seeking to be themselves and grabbing the clay of their becoming from the craters of their parents' bared being, from the wells of their nurturing cradles. It's hard at first for anyone. The house after all is big, too big for a mother and father without their young.

The manse is quiet, too hushed and still, for lives shaped in the bell tower of passionate family debate over the Middle East, and over who has the right to leave dirty socks in the living room. But, once they are gone, one gets accustomed, as one must.

And then comes the surprise, when one of them comes home, just for the summer, mom, or, just to save a little money, dad. The homestead becomes small and crowded, noisy beyond one's choice, a hotel where the proprietors begin to wonder why they are in the business. "Give her a little money to get a place of her own," says Dad.

"No, no, I couldn't, I want to be independent," says babe.

Mom and Dad begin to live externally, noticing the trail of laundry leading to the guest bedroom, worrying once again about walking around nude, thinking about whether twenty-year-old baby has had her dinner, whether she

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is happy, and why she is home so late. The universal assurance, "I can take care of myself" gives no peace, no security.

"I know she is complaining to her friends that we don't leave her alone," says Dad.

"Why not," says Mom, "I am complaining to mine that I am never alone anymore."

The empty nest is a venture, an enterprise that must be protected, guarded, patrolled, shielded. Here at last after twenty and more years of grubbing for worms to toss into the demanding beaks, Mamma Robin can look to the state of her own feathers. They need preening, for sure. No matter what else she had been doing while the little ones grew, never mind if she was a professional, an attorney or teacher or executive, the center was in the fledglings, God's little children. Though she might struggle against it, arguing in court, demanding justice, grading papers, making "tough" decisions, Johnny's whereabouts, Susie's school problems, Annie's doctor's appointment, floated at the core. Now alone at home, she has another chance at life, at new adventures, vast possibilities. When Mom was young the choices were unfathomable, but the hopes formed at her own mother's knee were more limited, less explicit, than those of her own children. With them out and gone, she is a young adult once again. New career, world travel, study for self development, change of personality (shall I get an elder's Hell's Angels), live abroad, build a house, get a totally new wardrobe, quit my job, and how many other options flaunt themselves.

Of course, parenthood cannot be obliterated. Once a parent, always a parent. When Paul gets a motorcycle, it doesn't matter if he is living three thousand miles away, he needs a call to remind him to wear his helmet. Yet, days go by when Mom writes and lives and plans (without a thought of her babies) for herself in joy unconnected to her parenthood and in satisfaction for herself alone, alone in the nurturing nest.