

Letting Go

by Beth Hall

I feel like my hair is flying straight away from my face, I'm grabbing the bar of the roller coaster car so hard my hands ache, and getting off the ride, onto legs like Jell-O — my brain keepstelling me to get up and walk away but my limbs havingtrouble cooperating — as the rush of the ride is still fresh inmy cells. I have been parenting a child for 18 years and now, I'm watching her leave for the first time.

There were so many moments I meant to be the perfect parent, and they passed me by before I had time to complete them. There were so many times I meant to tell her what was right and good about her instead of focusing on the little “suggestions” for what she could do better. There were so many times that I meant to take care of myself so I wouldn't be a burden or hold her back from the hopes and dreams she has for herself. There are so many ways that I forgot to prepare for this moment.

Before I understand what is happening, I am sobbing, surprised by the strength of my emotion and stunned by the depth of my despair. When did I begin living through her as if I had no life of my own? How did I forget to remind myself that she is an independent being, blossoming into an adult? She is an adult off to begin her own journey of independence, which necessitates leaving me behind. Consumed with the task of mothering, why did I think so many silly moments would be so easily remembered or brought back to memory? Like the photo books I mean to put together each year, I find myself with only boxes of pictures thrown together haphazardly. The first time she raised her dark-haired head and discovered a world beyond her bassinet — my husband and I continue to be the only two that seem to be able to understand the magic and the hilarity of that moment. Her first step, her first day of school, first broken bone, first overnight, the first boy, the first time she drove, and of course all the seconds, thirds and one-hundredths... like the blur beyond the edges of my vision on the roller coaster ride, the rest of the moments, all important at the time, slide into a blur that seems to have slipped by with impossible speed. This young lifetime as a family, that has now so quickly passed is like the roller coaster ride, it is over before it has even begun!

Of course I know she will return — many times. Of course I know that our relationship is deep, and reaches far beyond the bond of living under the same roof. Of course I know that college is just a step that will involve steps back to the safety and comfort of home in between the surge outward. Of course I know... but right now I just can't seem to care. I sit in my car, my sixteen-year-old getting his hair cut; I have no more

than 20 minutes to myself. My husband and my daughter have headed south to the college of her choice where she is enrolled in a summer institute — living in a dorm, taking her first classes — my baby is a college student. She is ready — I hope. She is excited — and scared. So much of the preparation has been about her that I forgot to pay attention to the feeling of loss for myself.

I always meant to try letting go, to raise my hands high on those roller coaster rides of yore. I always admired others' willingness to lift their hands in the air and let the ride simply happen. It was harder for me to trust that somehow gravity and nature would hold my body on this earth rather than fling me, or the car itself, into the atmosphere. I never have been able to let go ... until now.

I am amazed by how deeply and truly my confidence and trust in my daughter matters to her as she sets forth. It is clear to me now that she has always needed to be seen and validated more than she needed to be corrected or cajoled. Did I encourage enough? Does she know I believe in her? We recently had a moment where I let her have it after a missed curfew. She defended her position with indignant logic and a splash of pleading to which I responded; “you are so self-absorbed, it's like you don't even care how we feel.” Her eyes told the story; I had cut her to the bone. And I knew that I had gone too far, yet I wanted to feel justified for the years of worry and the fear that never goes away. A lifetime later, after we had made up and slogged through our own versions of the truth, she hit the nail on the head when she said; “Everything I do is basically to make you proud.” I could fill all the oceans with the tears this evokes in me and how this reminds me of a truth I have known since the beginning — that children's esteem is based in large part on their parents' positive view of them — but my buttons were pushed and too often I forgot to remember and stay vigilant. Oh please, I pray that I have conveyed my trust enough to hold her steady.

I know she is ready to try her own version of a first step, just as she was on her first birthday when she stood up and walked from her father to me, six baby steps before she landed on her padded bottom and laughed with the pride that only a baby can embody. And as I weep and experience the devastation of her loss for me, I know that in my heart of hearts she needs me to let go. This time I really will hold my arms in the air and trust to the world because this time I understand - it is these moments of trust that mean everything and bind us for life. The sharing of the real joy and the real pain. Her fears. My fears. Our joining in support of each other as a family — not to hold on for dear life but to let go because we know that our connection is meant to be. The tie that binds us is not the iron bar that clamps us into the ride, but the one that is forged in love and trust.