



Empty nest syndrome

Towards the end of this year my full-time mothering role will come to an end as my youngest daughter heads off for University. I'm trying hard not to think too much about it. After all haven't I spent the last 18 years raising my daughter to become an independent, fully functioning, contributing member of society? I'm just not so sure I'm looking forward to *my* new-found independence or the



change in family dynamics which will undoubtedly be a consequence of our youngest child leaving home. What I'll miss most are mealtimes together around the table. I have fought over the years since our children were young to maintain a family mealtime routine. When they were younger it was a place where the children all had a time of sharing about their day and where everyone else learned to listen to their brother or sister telling 'their story about their' day. As they got into teenage years and became young adults it was a place for discussion about 'hot' topics in the news or things they were passionate about; saving the environment, women's rights, men's rights, poverty, social issues – we debated them all, sometimes heatedly, sometimes thoughtfully, sometimes with sadness. Sometimes it was used as a time to wind each other up. I love nothing more now than to have all my children around the table and I like to sit quietly and listen to all the 'banter' going on. My youngest daughter is the greatest debater of them all. I'm really going to miss our discussions, even the ones about tidying her room up!

Perhaps underneath I have a fear that I am not in control anymore. No longer do I know where my children go and who they go with. I no longer have any influence over what they read or what they watch. Part of being a parent is being able to let our children go. To allow them the freedom to make their own choices, even if we do not agree with those choices. When they were young we made choices for them, now they are grown up they make their own choices and experience the consequences of those choices. I've spoken to many parents who suffered greatly because of their children's choices. There is no instruction manual that will prepare you, when you become a parent, for the pain and hurt you will endure for your children's unwise and sometimes impulsive, unthought out decisions. All we can do as parents is trust our children into the Lord's care. Perhaps we also need to remember the mistakes we made in our youth and the lessons we learned from them. We could argue that without mistakes and hardships there can be no drawing nearer to the Lord.

I ask myself what my role is now; now that I am no longer required to be a full-time mother? Being a mum has become my identity, who am I now? For the last 18 plus years I have devoted myself to my children's wellbeing in every way. I've been mum, nurse, cook, playmate, counsellor, taxi-driver, launderer, IT technician, cleaner..... What is my job description now? Many women find this time of life is an opportunity to try new things, to



take up voluntary or charity work, try a new job or return to the career they once had. To try a new hobby or become involved in a cause close to their hearts. Some days you will relish your newfound freedom. Other days you will mourn for what feels like the end of an era. Now is the time to be active, not passive. Our children are moving on with their lives, we must do the same. It is our time to choose.

Who is this man sitting across the table from me? If the relationship with your spouse has been put on the backburner while bringing up the children, then husband and wife can find themselves strangers. Sadly, it is often at this time of life that many marriages end in divorce. Perhaps we need to remember that we were a couple first before we were parents, with hopes and dreams and aspirations. The pressures of life get in the way, job, finances, children, illness, sometimes it feels like a struggle just to get through each day. Now is the time to rekindle those dreams you had together. It is *your* time together.

Watching our children grow into young adults brings back the memories of our own youth and the dawning realisation that we are growing older. Our youthful years are behind, senior years beckon. Birthdays seem to come round far too quickly, and we stop remembering how old we are. The mirror ceases to be kind and shows up every wrinkle and grey hair. The stark reality that we are nearer to old age than youth is frightening. Western society doesn't really do 'grow old gracefully'. Glossy magazines are full of older celebrities who have undergone cosmetic surgery with the hope of holding onto their youthful looks. Our children may even become a source of envy for their carefree youthfulness. Each generation is apt to feel that the younger generation has it easier than they did!

What I have learnt is that time is precious. We have so little time really. Make the most of all the opportunities the Lord gives you. What, at the time, may seem a chore will later become a cherished memory. My daughter played hockey for a local club. I used to stand freezing to death in wind and rain on the side of the pitch watching her play. I could have not bothered and stayed in the warm, but I know it meant the world to my daughter that I took the time and effort to watch her. The warm winter coat I invested in was well used! My daughter now has a weekend job in a local store. When she was learning to drive I used to take her to work. This meant early mornings starts and late nights finishes but I didn't mind. I used the opportunity to talk to my daughter on the journey into town, to get to know her. I miss those journeys now she has passed her test. Nothing is for ever; life is constantly changing.

Perhaps the most important thing to learn is to live in the 'here and now'. We cannot look back and yearn for the past and we don't know what tomorrow will bring. God has given us today and He will equip us with what we need for each day. Like the manna in the desert His grace is sufficient for us and it will be renewed every day. Don't waste time fretting over what you don't have anymore, be grateful for what God has given you today.

"But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you....." (2 Corinthians 12:9)



*“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3: 22-23)*

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