

# Grad night culminates lifetime of letting go

By Karen Telleen-Lawton

**M**Y right hand, stretched octave-wide, could give her a backrub without ever changing position. Her skin felt like softened butter, unmarred by the bumps and scars of childhood. A light peach fuzz of hair haloed her head. When she gazed at me, the trust was instinctive. We were one in her eyes, as indeed she had shared my watery quarters for all of her life.

This angel was my newborn. Now I gaze at her as she primps for graduation at the bathroom mirror. Her deep ocean eyes are my mom's, her nose is my husband's, her hair is mine, but somehow she is herself, beautiful and bafflingly unique. Her mortarboard is supposed to be flat on the head, not angled jauntily like an Easter bonnet. But with 18 years of experience, I hold my tongue, and let it go.

From the time of our first separation - her birth - child rearing has been a thrilling and anguishing process of letting go. I let go in her infant swimming class, watching her float as naturally as if she were still in the womb. Soon after, I let go my No. 1 status when she spoke her first word. Though I had trained her diligently to utter "mama" as the milestone, she pointed at the neighbor's puppy and squealed her first word, "dog!"

On the first day of kindergarten, a top-knot pigtail kept her thick froth of hair out of her eyes. She barely stopped at the door to turn and wave at her little brother and me, dancing confidently into education. That day I let go of being her primary teacher, but it was more than that. When she returned home, brimming with news of what she'd done and whom she'd met, I realized with a twinge that I would never again know everything about my child.

As she progressed through school, she acquired whole domains of knowledge apart from me. She enjoyed interests I hadn't exposed her to and developed a unique character that sometimes couldn't be traced to



her father or to me. Her favored response when reproached for a wrongdoing was to explain defensively, "I'm an Emily-girl!"

Around middle-school age, she and I both let go of believing that I could make everything better. Sullen silences and moody outbursts revealed her inner turmoil. I was frustrated both by my inability to ameliorate muddles and by her rebuffs of my attempts. At this stage, letting go was a little more palatable.

Her return to civility coincided with her taking on the heavy badge of modernity - busyness. Childhood swim teams gave way to a passion for water polo and a lifeguard job. Ceaseless phone calls were supplemented with chat rooms and a steady boyfriend. SATs, college visits, and application essays were squeezed into time that wasn't even there. I was just trying to hang on.

The college application process drew us together with the goal of interweaving the events of her life to find the story of the person within. I was the source and keeper of her history. As I let go of that history, she took on the mantle of her life.

But the present presses in. I work on constructing Grad Night, tracing and painting as a whimsical "Through the Looking Glass" emerges from plywood, watercolor, and sweat. I daydream alternately about my daughter's upcoming graduation, and my own SMHS Grad Night ("The Hobbit") in 1974. At the end of my shift, I unfold cramping knees, straighten tired shoulders and feel my aching back, wishing a huge hand could envelope me in a giant one-hand backrub. Perhaps I'll go to my mom's.

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