

Off To College, But Still Connected

By Risa C. Doherty

After almost eighteen years, I had grown quite attached to my son. I never believed in love at first sight and it was no different with my beautiful baby boy, when they first handed him to me. Then, I got to know the infant who lay cradled in my arms. We would stare into each other's eyes, and we bonded. As the years progressed, I marveled at his wit, intelligence and compassion and held on tight as my little boy emerged a young man. And, now, unbelievably, we were soon to be driving him to college.

Over the summer, I had roamed the aisles of the Bed, Bath & Beyond, going through the motions and purchasing the essentials; trying not to think about the inevitable. I tried to focus on his packing and not his leaving. His departure date loomed before us and I had difficulty planning beyond that date. I almost wished I could freeze time that day because I knew I would have separation anxiety once he was gone. Still, it was a wonderful opportunity for him: an outstanding university with an idyllic campus. The whole world seemed to be in front of him. Isn't this what I wanted for him? Wasn't I so pleased with his choice and optimistic about his ability to succeed? If so, why was this separation so, so difficult?

As we drove up, the student greeters cheerfully approached our car, efficiently and effortlessly whisking our first-born off to join a group of his peers. It was so strange to have him removed from our vehicle and taken away from us so suddenly: a symbolic separation. No more than three minutes had passed and another set of perky coeds appeared at our car window, seeking to remove our fifteen year-old daughter after mistaking her for a college student. It was as if they wanted her to join their gang.

My son seemed indifferent to the news that the blinds were missing from the window of his new room. He knew that the direct morning sun could not rouse him from his slumber, anyway. I debated as to whether or not I should campaign for window coverage. After all, his window was ground level, near a walking path, and if I could just identify which window was his, a quick peek inside once in a while would quell my maternal concerns for his well-being. Perhaps I could convince an enterprising freshman to surreptitiously keep watch outside his window and e-mail reports back to me.

Since he is male, he did not have any stuffed animals in his room. It was a shame that there was no good spot for a Nanny cam-style hidden camera. Still, even if placement of such a camera was possible, I think I was happier without 24/7 coverage. I think what mothers really want is information, but not necessarily feature films. And, especially with boys, that information is not always offered.

Finally, he was all settled in and my heart sank as we departed. The University had done its best to ease the transition for us, offering lectures by skilled professionals, outlining our new roles as parents of 21st century college students. Colleges now offer such classes because they recognize the need to provide answers to parents who seem more lost at this critical time than the students.

I set myself a goal: not to call Alec until he called me. After all, he had gone away to sleepaway camp for eight weeks at a time and we would be able to visit him on Parents' Weekend, eight weeks from drop-off. Yet, as each hour passed, I wondered how he was: did he make nice friends, where were they from, what were they studying, how was each professor, was the work too hard, how was the food? I had a litany of questions, and like most teens, I knew he would not enjoy addressing them point for point. I did not know the answers to questions like these after he first left for camp or even during his month-long European film program, yet they were so much more important to me now, as so much seemed to be riding on this experience. After all, he moved down to college to live ON HIS OWN for four years. I remember clearly how college served as a critical life juncture for me. So, I held out for three long days, until I a linen delivery snafu forced me to text him critical delivery information. After a few texts back and forth, I intimated that real contact would be much appreciated. Consequently, I found myself face to face with a real-time computer image of my son as we were able to chat. I was calmed, seeing his tousled hair and warm smile.

I envied him a bit for setting out on this great adventure now, but college today is a different world than it was in my time. When I was leaving for school thirty-one years ago, with my manual typewriter with the "s" key which stuck, I could not fathom what role technology would play in college life today.

Years ago, when my peers and I nervously and excitedly embarked on our college experience, we were like Robinson Crusoes, set adrift on our individual life rafts. There was basically no contact with home, save for the weekly, expensive, long-distance phone call, either from the payphone in the hall, or from the landline we paid to install in our room. We lost touch with friends back home: we were gone. Now our children call, text and videochat with friends across the country. Their support network extends beyond the perimeters of their campus. Facebook is a ubiquitous prescience our children's lives; they can share with all their friends every minute detail of their experience at school. Since I have resisted many invitations to join Facebook, I occasionally receive updates on my son's life at school from friends or relatives whom he had agreed "to friend" and have thereby gained access to his private Facebook page. That way I was able to determine that he was still single, but in a relationship: information which was later to be forthcoming, but had not yet been shared directly with me. I am hopeful that if he decides to join a cult, that my contacts in the network will give me enough notice for me to jump in the car and drive the four and a half hours to his school.

The manner of telephone contact is at issue, as well. They no longer offer to install landlines in the dorms at my son's school, except upon special request. I personally know someone who prides himself as one of the first adults to live in a Manhattan apartment, without ever installing a landline, relying solely on his cell for years now. Believe it or not, to some members of the older generations, this is troubling. Although we ourselves rely heavily on our cell phones all the time, we are not hypocritical in our concern here, because the college situation is different. When a child is living a few hundred miles away, there is a certain piece of mind a parent gets from speaking with their teenager on a landline. If the teen would be speaking from a phone in his dorm room, the parent would know precisely where the teen is and feel that the teen is safe. It seems natural to picture the teen sitting on his bed or at his desk in his room. When the teen is on a cell phone, he could be anywhere, outside a local bar, at a border crossing or at the local police precinct. There is no way to tell (without cell GPS tracking).

There is also the fear that a teen might lose or break his cell phone. That never really happened with landlines. If it happens there aren't a lot of ways to reach him, if he doesn't check his e-mails often. A phone call to the Resident Advisor for his dorm would be a serious embarrassment. So, I have the cell number for my son's best friend on my phone, just in case.

There was also a certain ritual associated with the old once-a-week call home. It was usually the same day of the week and in the evening, so that both parents were typically home. In my house, my Dad rarely got on the phone, but assured me that he was always there and was always getting every detail of the report from my mother. These days, the contact with home can be sporadic and a text, a call or an odd e-mail can come in at any time. When a full day has gone by with no contact whatsoever, I send my son a text and if I just get an "I'm okay" or a smile face response, I am satisfied that he is out there, somewhere, breathing.

Knowing how he was doing in school academically is another issue. Years ago, parents would be mailed a report card. That is no longer the case. Students receive their grades by e-mail. Shockingly, the parents who pay the tuition are not entitled to these grades, if the teen is no longer a minor. Still, your teen can grant you access and you can view his grades on the internet. Interestingly enough, if your teen submits a paper for a course, it is usually submitted by e-mail. After reviewing it, the professor e-mails it back, complete with interspersed comments and a grade. If your teen chooses to share this with you, you can see the paper and comments with the click of a mouse and get a feel for how your child's work is perceived by his professor.

Before he left, I thought that the responsibility of worrying about my son would be lifted from my shoulders. It would no longer be "my problem", thinking about who he was with and what he might be doing. Now I realize that it is still my worry. The only difference is that now I have absolutely no control. Even three states away, I will still worry about where he is and what he is doing. I know he knows how to reach me at almost anytime and we are both learning that he can handle most any problem, without my help. Still, he will always be my son. The relationship may change, the lines of communication may be different, but the connection will not disappear.

