

The Empty Nest

Not just for Mama Birds

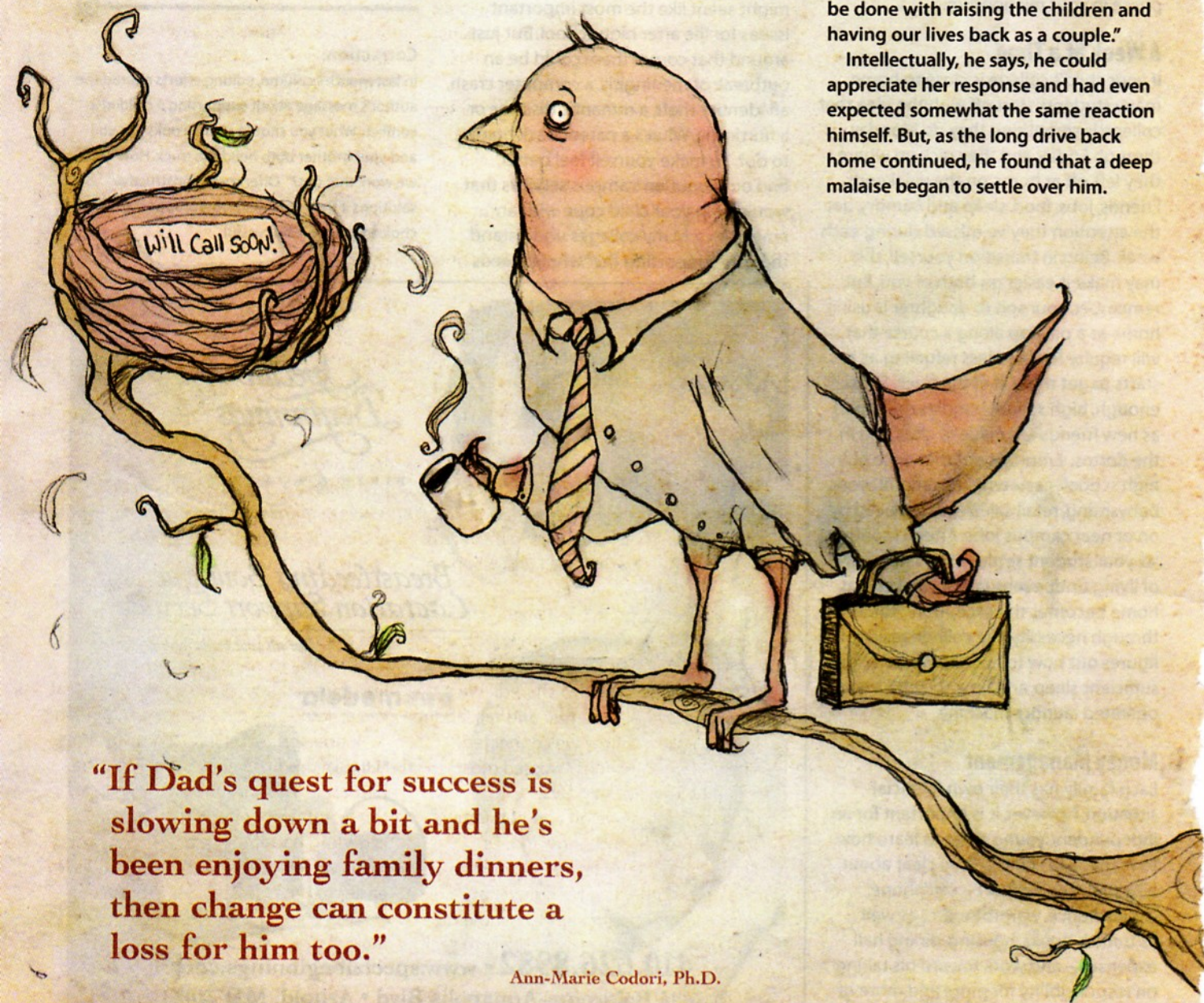
By Mary O. Parker

Illustration by Damon Carlson

Jim Henderson found out the hard way that the empty-nest syndrome isn't just for mothers anymore.

"It was such a jolt," said the Lutherville father of two. "Just after dropping off my son, Matt, at college, my wife was exuberant, while I was depressed! She was thrilled to finally be done with raising the children and having our lives back as a couple."

Intellectually, he says, he could appreciate her response and had even expected somewhat the same reaction himself. But, as the long drive back home continued, he found that a deep malaise began to settle over him.



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Ann-Marie Codori, Ph.D.

"I was prepared to be strong for my wife if she needed me to help her through her own empty-nest sadness, but I wasn't prepared for what came over me," he confides.

Henderson's reaction isn't uncommon. However, as a society, our focus has been on helping mothers cope with an emptied nest, while we've largely overlooked the fact that dads also experience feelings of grief and loss.

According to Patrick M. Gleason, Ph.D., who has a private psychotherapy practice in Washington D.C., it's important to remember that fathers have feelings too.

"In my research, fathers often told me that I was the first person who had ever asked them how they felt," he said. "They complained that people talk to mothers about their children and ignore fathers. The implication is that fathers either don't have concerns with regard to their children, or that fathers' concerns don't matter."

As in Henderson's experience, the bit of time just after a child leaves is usually when those concerns are most disquieting.

Havre de Grace father of two, Tyre Jay, said that for him, it was toughest when his oldest child, Geoff, first left home.

"Until he left for college, the longest I'd gone without seeing him was when he went to Boy Scout camp for a week," he said, and admitted that dropping him off at college and "leaving him there" was tough.

Bill Nye of Bel Air also found that his empty-nest feelings were the most raw when his son, Michael, left for college. He admits that there were times during the first year when he found himself experiencing feelings of loneliness.

"That first month was the hardest," said Nye. "I could talk to him on the phone but I couldn't see at him. I missed seeing his face when I talked to him."

The Empty Nest Syndrome

Jeff Klug, Baltimore-area therapist and family counselor, said that in the last 20 to 30 years, the role of the father has changed dramatically, thus affecting issues like empty-nest syndrome.

Klug said that in recent years, many

fathers have assumed and/or shared roles traditionally reserved for the mother. They are more emotionally bonded with their children and involved in their daily activities.

"Because of this," said Klug, "the empty nest experience may have a greater impact on the father than in previous generations."

Combine this with the fact that, at about the time their children are leaving the nest, many fathers have reached a point in their breadwinning roles where they are no longer working long hours or striving to climb the corporate ladder.

Ann-Marie Codori, Ph.D., a psychologist and assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University, says that if fathers are in their 50s when the nest is being emptied, as many are, their focus may likely be shifting away from work and toward the family.

"If Dad's quest for success is slowing down a bit and he's been enjoying family dinners, then change can constitute a loss for him too," she says.

For Henderson, a marketing executive, Dr. Codori's words ring true. His workload, once keeping him at the office 60-plus hours a week, significantly decreased the last two years his son was in high school.

"I'd reached a point where I didn't feel the need to work all the time to prove myself so I could enjoy spending quality time with Matt," he explained. "Because of this, his leaving left a bigger hole in my life than there would have been if I'd still been that workaholic I was when he was younger."

Nye, too, found himself feeling nostalgic for the time he spent with his son, particularly the moments of easy companionship the two shared. "We used to play golf together and talk about sports. That was how we connected. These were the things I missed most when he moved," said Nye.

As children move on and out, fathers' roles in their lives change and, Dr. Gleason says, this can be particularly stressful for the dad. He notes that women may be more apt to handle the loss because they are more likely to seek the support of their friends or other empty nest mothers. Men, however, tend

to manage the stress themselves.

Therefore, Gleason advises, the wives should check in with their husband and acknowledge that he may also need support. Wives should keep in mind that, like Henderson, their husbands might not even recognize this need until the very moment the child departs.

The child's departure, however, can have an unexpected upside as well: husbands and wives now have time to reconnect.

"Devoted parents are often so dedicated to raising their children that by the time the children leave, their own relationship might need some refreshment," Klug said. "For empty nesters I see in my practice — particularly couples — their discord can be that they forgot how to relate to one another."

Letting Go

While parents begin to reacquaint themselves, it is also a good time to let their children make their own mistakes. Parents tell Klug that it is difficult to know when to push and when to let go, especially as children transition from late adolescence to young adulthood.

"Some fathers, especially if they were the primary caregiver in the family, may try to over manage their young adult children just when the young adult is working on issues of autonomy, personal competency and decision-making," said Klug.

Jay, who found this push-pull balance more naturally than some said, "I felt like I'd done what I was supposed to do. Life goes in patterns and cycles and, as a father, my job is to keep the cycle of life going. You don't want to change that cycle; you want to build a strong person."

Henderson is coming to similar terms. "I figure this first year will likely be the hardest as I go through all the seasons the first time without him here, but it is getting better," he said. "When I hear in his voice how happy he is, it makes it easier to miss him."

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