

Old give way to young, but not without fears

My son has lived with me for 162,528 hours. We're now down to the last 48. Along with thousands of 18-year-olds around the country, he'll head off to college this weekend.

Getting this far was tough. We played the college admissions game, and while things turned out well, it was still pretty brutal. The hours poring over Web sites. The endless drafts of application essays. The unbearable anguish of rejection. The triumphant ecstasy of admission. Why must young people be subject to such emotionally difficult trauma during high school, the time in their lives when they're least equipped to handle it? It seems so cruel.

Fortunately, the cruelty passes quickly for an eager young graduate. Cruelty for mom and dad comes later, after the college decision is made and the plane ticket bought. What is more cruel than the realization that your child's time at home with you is done? Well, maybe not completely. Only 99.97 percent. I've got until Saturday morning.

Going to college is so different now. My generation went off to school before the Internet, before e-mail, and way, way before Facebook. Back in the day, I arrived on campus not knowing anybody. Thanks to facebook.com, my son is very well acquainted with social networks on campus before he's set foot in a classroom. He knows what groups he's interested in, he's had a bunch of questions answered, and knows what tons of people in his class look like.

This, apparently, is quite common. Web Sites such as myspace.com and facebook.com are greasing the social gears of Generation Y on campuses all over the country. Even I use it. Sure, I'm the oldest guy on the site, but what can I say? It helps me get to know my students. No surprise that it helps them get to know each other.

Our family arrived in the Springs in '94, when Internet pre-college socializing wasn't even imaginable. My kids were in first grade and pre-school. I know I'm supposed to look back and sigh, "Where did the time go?" But as a scientist, I can't help quantifying things. I know exactly where the time went. It went to carpools. It went to birthday parties. It



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went to school field trips, Bar Mitzvah study, drama productions, model rockets and drivers ed. Add it all up, you get 12 years of life in the Springs. Twelve very good ones.

Separation is good for teenagers, that's how they become adults. But it's hard for adults, because we become teenagers. This week, all over America, parents are going to leave their children on campus and say goodbye. We'll be shooed into our cars and shown the way to the airport by absurdly young but irritatingly sincere people who will make

it very clear our time on campus was over decades ago. We will not take it well.

But why should we go gentle into that good night? After all, our kids are going to be taught, influenced and mentored by people we don't even know. They will learn things we never knew, and they'll eventually surpass us in areas where we've always been smarter.

They will learn some of the things we believed in weren't right. They will learn a lot of what we were taught was wrong, some of the things we thought were important don't matter all that much, and some things we didn't care about matter a great deal. Worst of all, they will date each other without asking our permission, and marry us into families of complete strangers. Given all that, shouldn't we be a little freaked out?

I guess in the long run it doesn't matter how we feel; separation will happen anyway. Ultimately the old must give way to the young. That's the way it should be. Before we yield up our ground, though, we want to be darn sure that those who will come after have the knowledge, the character, and the passion to take the world we have given them and make it better. That is why we send them to college. It is what education is for.

At least, that is what I believe. And I will hold on to that belief, because it is what will give me the strength to embrace my son at the airport this weekend, tell him goodbye, and wish him good luck. That, and Parents' Weekend in October.

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