

Steps define time spent with children

On a Friday night, I left town with my daughter. On Saturday, I came back a much older man. Twenty hours have aged me 20 years.

Try as I might, there's no way to escape it: I am no longer a young adult. Young adults have children at home. After two decades of parenthood, that time has come and gone. Just outside our bedroom door, both kids' rooms lie quiet. Not even the dog goes there now.

My daughter and I pull up to the campus in a rental car full of suitcases. The dorm looks like something out of Harry Potter; I keep expecting the portraits in the common room to walk away.

I meet the Masters of the House, a married couple. They seem very nice, comfortably left of center, no surprise there. After all, they're on faculty at a prominent American university.

That would also explain why I don't see a single McCain sticker on any parent's car. Nor are there any Republican T-shirts or paraphernalia in sight. I guess only certain kinds of diversity are valued in academia nowadays. If Obama gets in, half his Cabinet will be on faculty here. Maybe as a parent I'll have an "in" with the administration. Hope they don't read too many of my columns.

The reverse of the prevailing political ambience is not the only clue we're not in Colorado Springs any more. My daughter's roommate is from a small town in Texas. She speaks fluent Mandarin to her parents, who greet me in halting English. I say "hello" in Chinese, the only phrase I know. Dad helps me rearrange the furniture.

Despite the language barrier, there's a shared commonality. Our babies are leaving home.

Sure, we've spent tremendous amounts of time, money and effort to bring them to this moment, but that's small consolation. Just because we want this doesn't mean we can bear it.

The school knows this very well; they've hired scores of eager, excessively young students to handle us, cheerily introducing themselves and volunteering to help carry things. They are "second-years;" my daughter will be a "first-year."

When, I wonder, are the Quidditch tryouts?

Once we unpack and haul away the box-



OPINION

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es, the room looks presentable. My daughter and I go out for a long lunch, then stop at the bookstore to buy some university propaganda cleverly disguised as clothing. I pick a sweatshirt to add to my collection. No need for a window sticker; I put that on the car long ago. It's desperately important to me that complete strangers in traffic know why our family drives such a cheap car.

The afternoon sun starts to wane. Now comes the Last Mile, the dreaded coup de grace of Orienta-

tion Day. After an alumni representative, the dean of students, and the president of the University have all had their say, I must walk in the Farewell Procession.

Led by a corps of bagpipers, a long column of parents and first-years leaves the chapel. Our destination is Hull Gate, which only the first-years will walk through. My trip with my daughter will take about 18 minutes. One for each year of our lives together.

Step. I become a father for the second time. I drive home in the New England snow and tell my waiting mother-in-law that she now has a granddaughter.

Step. First day of pre-school.

Step. She becomes a Bat Mitzvah. I see glimpses of the woman she will become.

Step. First boyfriend. She tells me to relax. The gate's arch is visible in the distance.

Step. High school graduation. The gate is yards away now.

Step. My mother dies. My daughter reads one of Mom's poems at the service. Mom was a successful writer, who will never read her grandchild's first novel. They remind me so much of each other.

Step. The gate looms in front of me, I can go no further.

Beyond lies a cheering throng of second-years, welcoming the newcomers to their respective houses. One holds a sign that says "Welcome home!"

And of course that's right. My daughter must go and start her new life with new friends in a new home.

We hug for too short a time. I say something private and hopefully meaningful. Then I turn and walk away.

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