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The Really, Really Empty Nest: Single Parents Launching Only Children

CARLA M. DAHL, *with* KATIE DAHL

“So this is what an empty nest looks like,” my married friends say as they walk back into the newly vacated family room with their arms around each other, having sent their youngest child off to military service, college, or the first apartment across town. The nest is not literally all that empty: they have each other, after all, along with their plans for the space and schedule that are now less cluttered.

Some of these couples have been seasoned by two or three or more birds having left the nest already. They know everyone will survive—and may be back. Some are even planning for the return of their “bungee-cord” offspring as the children transition from college to the not-quite-perfect job or return from military service or come back to the nest brokenhearted after the dissolution of a relationship. Whatever the next part of the family journey holds, however, the nest-keepers face it together.

Of course, there is no monolithic family and therefore no one way of launching young adult children.¹ Some adult birds are pretty angry with each other, and

¹Although family development theorists often discuss launching as though it were a one-way process (parents launching children), recent discoveries of the bidirectional impact of relationships on the brain suggest that we would more accurately discuss this family phenomenon as a mutual, interactional process: “launching/leaving,” perhaps. It is intriguing to wonder what would be illuminated about this experience if we imagined young adults

When only children of single parents leave home, the nest is really, really empty. This situation requires particular understanding and certainly is an area for fruitful ministry.

when the last child leaves, what had been covert, passive-aggressive skirmishes between the parents explode into overt battle. Others begin or continue their parallel lives, with civil or even friendly check-ins. Yet others are excited to build their “next marriage” (the one that begins now that the children are gone), deepening their already warm and loving friendships and partnerships.

One family constellation hasn’t received much formal attention in explorations of this family transition: the single parent launching one lone gosling or chick or cygnet—the one who walks back into the newly vacated family room with her arms wrapped around herself, or the one whose plans to fill his newly vacated schedule include a fishing trip with another single father.²

although most parents launching children in industrialized societies in the twenty-first century share many similar challenges, single parents of only children navigate those challenges without the emotional, physical, financial, or spiritual support of another adult in the household

This group is not monolithic, either. Some are divorced, some widowed, some never married. But they share in common one thing: a really, really empty nest. Their family has changed completely in one fell swoop, with little prior practice in letting go (unless you count kindergarten) and no other offspring waiting in the wings for their parents to get it right by the time *they* leave. Although most parents launching children in industrialized societies in the twenty-first century share many similar challenges and are more like each other than they are different from one another, single parents of only children navigate those challenges without the emotional, physical, financial, or spiritual support of another adult in the household.

In addition, only children of single parents, who also are more like their young adult peers than not, may experience launching in some particular ways due to their family constellation. An only child may have felt ensconced—comfortably or not, by his or her own initiative or at the parent’s implicit request—in the position of parental peer. She or he may have realized that parental hopes and dreams, pride, investment, desire to leave a legacy or to live vicariously—all of it rested on her or his shoulders, with no siblings to buffer the expectations. The intensity of

launching their parents or parents as leaving their adult children. For a fascinating discussion about how relationships and the brain shape one another, see Daniel Siegel’s work in interpersonal neurobiology; for example, *The Developing Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2012).

²How many families are we talking about? In the United States in 2010, 644,000 single fathers and 3.4 million single mothers were living with one child of their own between the ages of twelve and seventeen. It’s hard to extrapolate from the data how many of those adolescents are close to leaving in a given year or to know if older siblings have previously left, but we can safely, even if not precisely, say that *a lot* of single parents launch children every year. Clearly this is an area for fruitful ministry! Data retrieved from United States Census Bureau’s America’s Families and Living Arrangements website: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2011.html> (accessed November 13, 2012).

the single-parent/only-child dynamic can become a centripetal force that makes leaving complicated enough that some only children *cannot* do it, thus abandoning their own developmental work, while others *must* do it, exploding out of the parent's emotional force field with more desperation than planning.

THE TWO SIDES OF LAUNCHING AND LEAVING

"Two is not enough," my coauthor and daughter Katie said in junior high. (When she said that, I'm pretty sure she was ruing the fact that she had no one with whom to side against me.) In many ways, two has been more than enough. But when it comes to launching and leaving, the "not-enoughness" of two shows up in attending alone to the complexities of a transition that involves sending one's only son or daughter into the next part of their own life, or, for the child, of leaving one's primary parent. These complexities are represented by the inherent paradoxes in this transition: the hello that is embedded in good-bye; the forces for togetherness and the forces for separateness that are part of our human condition, of being created for relationship; the parent's experience of feeling both thrilled and bereft; the child's anticipation of new opportunities, challenges, and relationships and his or her concern for the parent left behind; the anxiety as each realizes in a new way, "If I lose you, I lose my whole family." As Katie remembers it:

I think my freshman year was when that whole liver thing happened for you. And I think I felt very worried about you, as usual, but it was magnified by me being away and you being alone. Plus Scholar [our golden retriever] died, and you were really alone. That was kind of a bad year.

These mixed emotions percolated for several years for Katie, eventually showing up in the lyrics of one of the songs in her musical *Victory Farm*.³ In the World War II story, the song is sung by Dottie, the eighteen-year-old daughter of a recently widowed Wisconsin cherry orchard owner. Dottie has been offered a full scholarship to Wisconsin State Teachers' College but has yet to tell her mother:

I've never left this county
I've barely left this town
I know my mother needs me
I don't want to let her down
But this little tree keeps growing
Keeps on reaching for the sky
And I feel my branches reaching
Toward a world that's much bigger than I
And this tree holds fast to the earth as it turns
Its leaves know when to let go.
Where will I turn when those leaves start to burn?
Will I fly where those autumn winds blow?

³Emilie Coulson and Katie Dahl (book and lyrics) and James Valcq (music), "Will I Fly?" from *Victory Farm* (unpublished manuscript, 2012). A snippet of "Will I Fly?" from Katie's album *Leaky Boats and Paper Birds* can be heard on iTunes.

Besides the paradox and ambivalence of the launching/leaving transition, the single parent and only child share overlapping developmental challenges. In many ways, young adulthood and middle adulthood mirror each other. Building a core sense of self, withstanding the pressures of a changing social landscape, deepening one's capacity for intimacy and for self-regulation, and engaging the world with passion and generativity: all of these are invitations that the launching/leaving process offers. For the young adult, these are first encounters with the invitations. For the midlife adult, the invitations may be returning with new urgency or more freedom to respond. But for both, they come in the context of paradox and ambivalence.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several theoretical perspectives help us understand the launching/leaving experience of single parents and only children. The first is family development theory, which focuses on multiple family "entries and exits" and the ongoing renegotiation of boundaries and roles over time. A second is a reconceptualization of family change over time, known as the life course perspective; and a third is the current imagining of the transition to adulthood.

Family development theory

Family development theory (FDT) as a conceptual framework emerged after World War II, when

American families were in disarray. Marriage on a weekend pass all too often was followed by a "Dear John" letter. Women are [sic] reluctant to leave jobs that had given them independence. Men, too, had changed; and the "crisis of reunion" was general as families struggled to establish themselves in the post-war economy.⁴

Following a family conference convened by President Truman in 1948, theorists such as Evelyn Duvall and Reuben Hill began to describe predictable ways families change over time. The eight stages of the family life cycle that they defined continue to influence theory development and research in family change, although some family scholars debate the universality of the stages (which is of interest to us because single parenting doesn't fit neatly into the stage model).

But FDT does offer a helpful window into the developmental tasks faced by single parents and their only children, particularly with regard to renegotiating emotional and physical boundaries. How fully might a single parent allow his or her only child to exit? How willing is an only child to step away, and how does she or he feel about navigating the physical and emotional distance from the parent? Katie recalls some of this boundary work from her freshman year in college:

I remember realizing at some point that I had not kept in touch very well and that that lack of contact had hurt your feelings or been hard for you. I really

⁴Evelyn Millis Duvall, "Family Development's First Forty Years," *Family Relations* (April 1988) 127.

don't think I was aware of that lack of contact at the beginning of the year, though I could be wrong. I think I was afraid that if I was in touch with you too much, or especially if you came down to visit me, that it would prove to people that I was a lame Carleton student who had just stayed close to home and didn't have whatever adventurous spirit I perceived cool Carleton students to have. I was dreadfully afraid of not fitting in or being admired or liked, and I think this played heavily into everything I did that first year—even if one would logically realize that sending one's mother an e-mail would not have an impact on her college social standing. I think now about how hard it must have been to have me gone and barely communicative.

Life course perspective

More recently, some family theorists have taken a “life course perspective,” which pays particular attention to the historical, economic, and sociocultural contexts in which the lives of individuals and families unfold. For example, in some cultures families do not launch children. Rather, they absorb new members (children's college roommates, new romantic partners, or coworkers). As a dominant culture in a given context, this pattern could set the standard. As a subculture within another context, however, this pattern could create stress if multigenerational households are rare or are seen as a failure of some kind.

the social clock is the socially acceptable timeline within a culture for accomplishing particular life tasks, and persons whose lives unfold outside of that timeline may encounter internal and external pressure, confusion, or outright disapproval

Within the life course perspective, the concept of the “social clock” may highlight some of the challenges single parents encounter. The social clock is the socially acceptable timeline within a culture for accomplishing particular life tasks, and persons whose lives unfold outside of that timeline may encounter internal and external pressure, confusion, or outright disapproval.

For example, married parents who launch children and turn their attention to reinvesting in their marital relationship will find among their partnered peers encouragement, commonality, and direction for that life. Single parents who begin dating in earnest once the responsibilities of parenting are less immediate may need to “make it up as they go,” with fewer life scripts written for that scenario. Married partners may begin to experience financial freedom (unless, of course, their young adults are forwarding tuition bills back home), while single parents who had been relying on child support may experience a precipitous drop in income. Such aspects of the leaving/launching transition are often experienced by single parents as “out of sync” with the social clock of their culture or subculture and thus more stressful.

From young adult to emerging adult

From the “leaving” side of the launching/leaving process, a third theoretical consideration reflects the changing nature of the social clock. Adolescence is itself a relatively recent social construct in human history (not the chronological age, of course, but its social meaning and the accompanying expectations for exploration and identity development that obtain in many industrialized countries). I refer in this article to those being launched and leaving as “young adults,” but within the past several years, yet a new stage of development *between* adolescence and adulthood has been identified: the emerging adult.⁵

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With many people currently postponing marriage and parenting until at least their late twenties, the years between eighteen and twenty-nine have become a time for exploring religious beliefs, developing careers, and deepening relationships. Jeffrey Arnett notes three themes of emerging adulthood that, for our purposes, hold implications for leaving:

[E]merging adults see the three cornerstones of becoming an adult as *accepting responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent*. Each of these criteria has connotations of independence specifically from parents.⁶

As I noted earlier, only children of single parents may have a strong sense of being their parent’s friend, confidante, or primary support person. Achieving independence “specifically from parents” may seem less an issue when one has had a sense of being more of an adult peer even as an adolescent; however, developmentally, it is still important to disentangle oneself from that role and pursue independence as a member of the “younger generation.” Skipping that process—perhaps believing that “we won’t need that; we’ve already developed a level of mature egalitarian relationship” and therefore maintaining co-residence status during the launch—can be detrimental for both single parent and only child and interfere with the development of authentic maturity. Arnett notes, in discussing the move from conflict to companionship between parents and children:

Numerous studies have found that emerging adults who have moved out feel

⁵See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Richard Settersten and Barbara Ray, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-Somethings Are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood, and Why It’s Good for Everyone* (New York: Bantam, 2010); this book is based on interviews with 500 people as part of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. Additional information can be found at <http://www.macfound.org/networks/research-network-on-transitions-to-adulthood/> (accessed October 30, 2012).

⁶Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 48. Italics in original.

closer to their parents than emerging adults who have remained at home and have fewer negative feelings toward them.⁷

In addition, for the single parent who has been attempting to manage reactive adolescent conflict as well as his or her own desire to “have input” into a child’s decisions (yes, I realize that’s a euphemism for control, but it’s one of my favorites), the move from conflict to companionship may be well served by moves toward independence on the part of both the emerging adult and the single parent. Each member of the family needs to balance the pressures from the forces for separateness and the forces for togetherness that are inherent in relationships.

Not everyone is happy with the addition of this stage to models of modern human development. One author, Diana West, goes so far as to say that it may be the downfall of civilization as we know it.⁸ West is concerned with the blurring of generational boundaries (including the kind I’ve described above); she places the blame on parents who overindulge children or who, for their own emotional reasons, resist allowing their children to leave. She describes this as “a cultural whip-lash that twisted around a child’s duty to his parent into a parent’s duty to his child”⁹ and suggests that both children and adults need to stop pining for adolescence. West’s take on this may disproportionately locate the problem in individuals and fail to account for the recent and continuing climate of job insecurity, housing crisis, expensive education, and communities fractured by anxiety—factors that make launching and leaving more tenuous processes than in previous years. Katie’s experience of the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, reflects this:

I remember very much wishing you were with me when September 11 happened; it was so soon after I’d gotten there and the whole world felt so different and scary anyway, even without such a huge national tragedy.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

For all parents, Martin Luther’s exaltation of parenthood carries both comfort and command. True, it may be a calling that is “adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels”;¹⁰ but for many single parents, the vocation of parenting has also been adorned with exhaustion, loneliness, scrimping, self-doubt, and second-guesses—not necessarily the characteristics one would associate with life as apostle, bishop, and priest to a congregation of one.¹¹ The twin privileges, however, of nurturing (however imperfectly) the faith of one’s child and of helping her or him develop gifts for loving and serving neighbor are sometimes ones that bear fruit in spite of our failings. It can help all parents, but perhaps particularly

⁷Ibid., 49.

⁸Diana West, *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America’s Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2007).

⁹Ibid., 12.

¹⁰Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press) 39.

¹¹LW 45:46.

single ones, to remember that God loves our children more than we do and is working for their good through us as we live out our vocation as parents.¹²

Similarly, for all children, Martin Luther's exhortation in the *Small Catechism* to honor father and mother carries both comfort and caution: "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them."¹³ For only children of single parents, particularly those who may be used to functioning as peer or protector, honoring, serving, and obeying may seem difficult to accomplish. Moving back into the "appropriate" generational level will mean losing one's place of specialness; however, as discussed earlier, it may also allow for a less intense and thus more satisfactory leave-taking.

The spiritual implications of launching and leaving described above open up relational space to both receive and offer forgiveness of self and other, which is a great relief to many single parents and only children. As the bus pulled away, taking my five-year-old to her first day of public school, my anxiety and grief focused itself on a failing that I suddenly became aware of: "Oh, no! I forgot to tell her about school patrols!" I hadn't prepared her for the world she was heading into. (Fortunately, her vocational ambitions quickly coalesced into a desire to become a hall monitor, so my failing didn't appear to affect the trajectory of her life.) Similarly, as I pulled away from Katie's college dorm after moving her in for the first time, my anxiety and grief focused itself on many more failings, more awareness of ways I wished I had better prepared her for the world she was heading into. After all, I'd had a dozen years to accumulate more examples. Katie identifies one of her own regrets from the leaving process:

I remember feeling very selfish about money. I don't think I had any concept of how much you were doing to make college possible for me. I think you'd always had such a generous can-do attitude about it that I sort of took it for granted.

Terrible. May I never be eighteen again.

To both the launching single parent and the leaving only child, the word of God is the same: "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col 3:13).

NESTED IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

As I have reflected theologically, theoretically, and experientially on the leaving and launching process of single parents and their only children, I have found myself returning often to the comfort of knowing that the process itself is "nested" in a community of faith. I have pondered what a skillful pastor and a caring congregation could most helpfully do for and with these families. Three foundational expressions of care come to mind:

¹²Elsewhere in this issue, see Jessicah Krey Duckworth's article on catechetical practices for families for its helpful principles and recommendations for priestly parents.

¹³Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 352.

1. Hold the paradox. Let the grief and relief coexist. “Hear into being” the loneliness and the freedom of the parent, the eager looking forward and the concerned looking backward of the child.

2. Offer a variety of kinds of support, particularly for single parents. We know that single parents do best when they have adequate social support, whether their children are in preschool, navigating adolescence, or writing the next chapter of their lives. Research suggests that social support improves the prognosis of cardiac patients, persons with depression, immigrants, and many others; surely it will enhance the “prognosis” of launchers/leavers as well. Caring communities of faith can provide tangible support (like short-term loans or free car repairs), advisory support (from attorneys about child support, for example, or family life educators about disciplining toddlers, or financial planners about preparing for the leaving process), and belongingness support (intentional, consistent inclusion in the life of the faith community).

3. Create rituals for the launching/leaving transition that go beyond high school graduation open houses. Rituals do for us what words often cannot. In one timeless moment, they express who we are, how we are connected to one another, what we believe, where we are headed, and what we feel. For example, what does it mean to send one’s only child into combat? How can a faith community hold the parent’s fear and the young adult’s vulnerability in visible ways? If an only child’s way of leaving includes risky decisions, how might a ritual communicate love and acceptance along with concern? Skillful pastors and caring communities will value and practice meaningful ritual.

I’ll end with the chorus from a song that became a ritual for Katie and me in all our launching/leaving moments. Katie notes, “*I remember you playing Ann Reed’s song for me and me crying and crying on the way down to school and when I went abroad. It seemed to summarize every great thing about our relationship, so it was very meaningful to me whenever you played it. I still think of it sometimes.*”

We cannot know what you go through or see through your eyes
But we will surround you, the pride undisguised.
In any direction whatever you view
You’re taking our love there with you.¹⁴ ⊕

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¹⁴From Ann Reed, “Every Long Journey,” © 1986 Turtlecub Publishing/BMI; lyrics at <http://www.annreed.com/lyricsjourney.html> (accessed November 13, 2012).

¹⁵If you’ve forgotten what launching/leaving feels like, you might find a reminder through National Geographic’s YouTube video, “Baby Ducks’ First Flight,” found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWDXIhy9oJA> (accessed November 3, 2012).