**Saying goodbye to my child, the youngster**

**By** [**Michael Gerson**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/michael-gerson/2011/02/24/ABocMYN_page.html)**, Published: August 19** **E-mail the writer**

Eventually, the cosmologists assure us, our sun and all suns will consume their fuel, violently explode and then become cold and dark. Matter itself will evaporate into the void and the universe will become desolate for the rest of time.

This was the general drift of my thoughts as my wife and I dropped off my eldest son as a freshman at college. I put on my best face. But it is the worst thing that time has done to me so far. That moment at the dorm is implied at the kindergarten door, at the gates of summer camp, at every ritual of parting and independence. But it comes as surprising as a thief, taking what you value most.

The emotions of a parent, I can attest, are an odd mix: part pride, part resignation, part self-pity, even a bit of something that feels like grief. The experience is natural and common. And still planets are thrown off their axes.

Our ancestors actually thought this parting should take place earlier. Many societies once practiced “[extrusion](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1987-09-17/features/8703140352_1_adolescence-bickering-parents/2),” in which adolescents were sent away to live with friends or relatives right after puberty. This was supposed to minimize the nasty conflicts that come from housing teenagers and their parents in close proximity. Some non-human primates have a similar practice, forcibly expelling adolescents from the family group.

Fat lot did our ancestors know. Eighteen years is not enough. A crib is bought. Christmas trees get picked out. There is the park and lullabies and a little help with homework. The days pass uncounted, until they end. The adjustment is traumatic. My son is on the quiet side — observant, thoughtful, a practitioner of companionable silence. I’m learning how empty the quiet can be.

I know this is hard on him as well. He will be homesick, as I was (intensely) as a freshman. An education expert once told me that among the greatest fears of college students is they won’t have a room at home to return to. They want to keep a beachhead in their former life.

But with due respect to my son’s feelings, I have the worse of it. I know something he doesn’t — not quite a secret, but incomprehensible to the young. He is experiencing the adjustments that come with beginnings. His life is starting for real. I have begun the long letting go. Put another way: He has a wonderful future in which my part naturally diminishes. I have no possible future that is better without him close.

There is no use brooding about it. I’m sure my father realized it at a similar moment. And I certainly didn’t notice or empathize. At first, he was a giant who held my hand and filled my sky. Then a middle-aged man who paid my bills. Now, decades after his passing, a much-loved shadow. But I can remember the last time I hugged him in the front hallway of his home, where I always had a room. It is a memory of warmth. I can only hope to leave my son the same.

Parenthood offers many lessons in patience and sacrifice. But ultimately, it is a lesson in humility. The very best thing about your life is a short stage in someone else’s story. And it is enough.

The end of childhood, of course, can be the start of adult relationships between parents and children that are rewarding in their own way. I’m anxious to befriend my grown sons. But that hasn’t stopped the random, useless tears. I was cautioned by a high-powered Washington foreign policy expert that he had been emotionally debilitated for weeks after dropping off his daughter at college for the first time. So I feel entitled to a period of brooding.

The cosmologists, even with all their depressing talk about the eventual heat death of the cosmos, offer some comfort. They point out that we live in the briefest window — a fraction of a fraction of the unimaginable vastness of deep time — in which it is physically possible for life to exist. So we inhabit (or are chosen to inhabit) an astounding, privileged instant in the life span of the universe.

Well, 18 years is a window that closed too quickly. But, my son, those days have been the greatest wonder and privilege of my life. And there will always be a room for you.

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