

THE CROWDED NEST

By Sue Jackson

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A couple of years ago my partner and I had managed with much manoeuvring to arrange a 'weekend escape' from those complex and demanding weekend parental commitments – washing, cleaning, chauffeuring, shopping and netball matches. We found ourselves in the Anglesea pub on a long, blustery and sodden Sunday afternoon, and with nothing better on offer, began discussing our lives. One aspect in particular had been concerning me for some time, an issue of professional and personal interest, namely the Empty Nest Syndrome.

As it is popularly understood, the Empty Nest Syndrome suggests that women, especially, experience children leaving home as a time of desolation, requiring major readjustment. This is meant to happen when the children reach their late teens or early 20s. Yet everywhere I looked, the houses of my colleagues, friends, clients and indeed my own, seemed to be groaning at the seams with youngsters sometimes well into their 20s or beyond. As Bill Cosby once commented: all the time your children are teenagers you worry about them leaving home, then they hit twenty, and you realise they never will! Few of the people I knew were facing the predicted traumas of the Empty Nest Syndrome. We decided that contrary to popular opinion, the primary challenge for parents in midlife might be more appropriately termed the Crowded Nest Syndrome.

As far as I can see, there seems to be very little written about this developing social phenomenon, nor about its implications for parent-child relationships. Typically, standard

parenting manuals cut out at about eighteen, presumably because no instruction for parents is thought to be needed beyond this point. In fact, popular ideas about how to parent younger children are largely redundant in this context.

We decided that it would be good to address this gap in the literature, and to write something about our new syndrome. To ensure maximum respectability, all new syndromes require substantial theoretical underpinning. So, I have used some ornithological allusions to illustrate my points.

CLIPPED WINGS

There are cultures where leaving home has never been an option. Nowadays, in the West also, there is an increasing tendency for children to stay at home or to ricochet home well into young adulthood. This is no doubt due, at least in part, to changing trends in employment and education. As Naomi Klein demonstrated so convincingly in 'No Logo', the modern work force is characterised by impermanence. The young, in particular, are frequently poorly paid and highly dispensable, with minimal future prospects of advancement. This means that for some youngsters the possibility of leaving home at all becomes remote. Furthermore, the capacity to remain living out of home, once that transition has been made, depends to a large extent on the vagaries of the work place.

Also, perhaps in part because of increased life expectancy, the developmental stages in life seem to be extending. Some of the other tasks, apart from leaving home, that people used to confront in their late teens – entering the workforce, becoming financially independent and in some cases, starting a family and marrying - are often occurring considerably later in life. This is reflected in changed attitudes and language, for example in the way that many young adults refer to University as 'school'. I was interested to see Venus Williams

recently quoted in the Age Good Weekend magazine as saying, with regard to relationships: “ I’m not really in the market right now. I’m only 22...when I’m 40 maybe.” And if you can anticipate living to 80+, what is the rush? In the same way, what is the hurry to move out of home? Of course, with adult children staying at home longer, it is not only their wings but their parents’ wings too that may be clipped.

RUFFLED FEATHERS

Living for longer with adult children can provide a wonderful and unique experience of getting to know your children intimately as adults, an experience that was not as commonly available to some previous generations. However, for many people it does present considerable challenges. When I have spoken to some parents on this topic, they have occasionally ‘confessed’ to the unconventional arrangements negotiated with their children. Yet other parents cope by adhering to the old adage ‘what you don’t know can’t hurt you’, but continue to worry, while issues of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll are effectively hand-passed, often to the parents of their children’s friends.

At a time when many, perhaps naively, expected their parenting responsibilities to be virtually over, they find them burgeoning in scope and complexity. In mid life, and undergoing their own major transitions, many parents find themselves still living with large, sexually active, often financially dependent adults, who stay up late, play loud music and continually plunder the refrigerator. Operating from (at least) two different sets of values can be extremely difficult to accommodate under the same roof. For example, negotiating issues of domestic responsibility and territoriality can be repetitious and trying. It is astonishing how the subject of cleaning your own bedroom (or not) is a core theme for many families. Many parents of late adolescents can shut their doors and ignore what lurks inside, but if the smell starts to pervade the rest of the house this can be

problematic. I have actually worked with a family where the 23 year old could not find a cleared space to sleep comfortably in his own room and merely roamed to other locations within the house on successive nights, settling there with his sleeping bag.

Parents whose older children are heavily committed, with for example Year 12, tertiary studies or holding down several part time jobs, often find it difficult to ask them to contribute domestically because they already seem so stretched. Yet the parents can end up feeling resentful and exploited under these circumstances. Even then, the young people can feel that their parents have no appreciation of just how stretched they are.

With the young increasingly conducting their social and, in some cases, their work life through the night, the phenomenon of different diurnal and nocturnal rhythms can put increased pressure on shared space and family life generally. A recent study (the Melbourne Women's Mid-life Health Project), which is an annual survey of women's lives over nine years, found that in opposition to expectations, many women were not depressed when the nest eventually became empty. An additional interesting finding was that some women reported increased levels of sexual activity. One reason for this may well be that, as parents often complain, it is difficult to find time or opportunity for intimate, uninterrupted contact when young adults are roaming the house throughout the night.

As one of the increasing number of people who work from home, I typically start my working day early. While it can feel reasonable to keep the noise down at 8am so as not to wake sleeping family members, it can feel oppressive to be asked to do this at midday. It can also be uncomfortable to break for lunch only to find the young adults of the household just emerging from their bedrooms, often with partners or friends in tow. When so much work is now done nocturnally, in the entertainment, IT and service industries, parents can

be experienced as judgmental and disrespectful of work practices that do not conform to their own conventional patterns.

NEST EGG

This more leisurely transition into full adulthood can have implications for the length of time that parents have children either totally or partially financially dependent on them. While the youngsters may need assistance for longer and their parents may see it as their responsibility and/or be keen to assist, the parents may not necessarily want to or be able to extend their working lives. Their earning capacity may be finite, while the length of time they may need to provide for themselves, post-retirement, has increased. This can be another factor in fuelling the financial worries and insecurities that seem to blight the lives of so many people in mid-life. In extreme circumstances, and here I am thinking of two families I know, one with a 26 year old with a severe substance abuse issue, the other with a 30 year old with a gambling problem, two sets of parents – one on the brink of retirement, the other already 'grey nomads' - have chosen to put their respective financial dreams on hold to bail out their children.

I have worked with a number of parents who have purchased an investment property with the relocation and independence of their young adult in mind. This does not always work out as well as hoped. If the young person comes under financial pressure, which happens to so many in today's job market, rent to parents can seem more optional than to a stranger landlord. Clearly, depending on the parents' financial situation and the prior arrangements negotiated, this may or may not present a problem. Similarly, issues around the upkeep of the property can be treated as less of a priority if the house belongs to the family.

Then there is the phenomenon of children of wealthy parents, who are of independent means not needing to work. In the film 'About a Boy', Hugh Grant's character, who had inherited wealth from his father, when asked what he did, replied matter-of-factly: 'Nothing'. He proudly elaborated a complex and ingenious routine he had devised that involved dividing his day up into units of time to help time pass. He provides a good illustration of how difficult it can be to mature or make meaning of life in the absence of any necessity for work.

Some of the youngsters I see are struggling with very similar issues. Typically, their parents had always been absolutely clear about their goals in life. They were providers who were determined to give their families more than they had themselves. But the children of such parents do not necessarily share that value system. In some cases, they know they don't want to be like their parents, but cannot find a goal or objective of their own. I am working with one such young woman at the moment. At 26, she has her own apartment and car (presents from her parents), and does not want to work 'like a slave' as her father did, but feels completely frozen. The only work for which she is so far equipped does not meet her own or her family's expectations of her appropriate place in life. Consequently, she feels directionless and depressed, and her self-confidence reduces daily.

PECKING ORDER

Issues of hierarchy can become problematic when the household is composed of adults. It frequently seems inappropriate to operate in the old way, for example, with parents as the executive sub-system in charge. I have often found it fruitful when talking with families in this situation to invite people to consider other models of organisation. The communal living model is one alternative that often leads to rich conversations. Questions such as: "If you saw your daughter/father as a housemate rather than a child/parent, how might your

attitudes and expectations about domestic responsibilities and rights be different?" can lead to fresh outlooks.

Frequently, parents find it difficult to relinquish high levels of responsibility for their adult children and may also have low expectations of reciprocal care. I am thinking of a lovely couple, Jan* and Ed, whom I knew for quite some time. Their oldest son, Adrian, at 24, was beautiful, intelligent and ambitious. He was a medical registrar at a large local public hospital. Jan was going through a lot in her life. She had worries at work, financial concerns, struggles around her own spirituality and religious affiliation, as well as not inconsiderable health issues. And yet when Jan and Adrian met up they talked exclusively, as they always had done, about Adrian's life.

I challenged Jan about this, suggesting that our children's lives will be impoverished if we protect them from any expectation of reciprocal caring for us. I see it as important that we pass the baton of caring backwards and forwards between the generations. Only by taking their turn do our children learn to be nurturers as well as to be nurtured, which I believe is an important aspect of becoming a mature human being. It also encourages them to experience their parents as people, not just as parents. With increased life expectancy, a little mentioned developmental task – perhaps a 'first' for our generation - is the opportunity for those of us baby boomers fortunate enough to have our own parents still living to renegotiate our relationship with them as adults. It is probably harder to stereotype, isolate, marginalise and neglect seniors when our relationship has changed to one of person to person with our own parents. This is obviously just as applicable for our own children in relation to us.

EAGLE EYE

John Marsden, a writer with a deep appreciation of young people, argues that in raising sons there is an excess of parental scrutiny about what youngsters do. He makes the case, most eloquently, that to develop fully, young children need space and unsupervised time. I think that this is also the case in parenting young adults. One of the most challenging tasks for many of us parents is to move back, to refrain from enquiry and to trust our children.

I was particularly struck by the comment of a very wise supervisee whose 21-year-old daughter was living life in a very different way than she had hoped. She said that as she lay awake worrying about her at 3am, she would comfort herself by saying: “**At least** she is not using heroin/ severely depressed/ riding a motorbike/ homeless”. What she said resonated with me, and I realised how common it is for parents to comfort themselves in this way.

A colleague, another wise woman with adult children herself, suggested the next and most challenging step is to move from the ‘At Least’ position to a true appreciation of your offsprings’ choices and lifestyle. This can be extremely challenging, as I know from personal experience. As my two sons ploughed all their resources into making a horror film (and I hate horror) I remember finding it very hard to appreciate this as ‘real work’. Over time, as they wrote, directed, produced and acted in it, as well as recruiting a whole cast of young actors and negotiating to use equipment and local venues, all as a no budget venture, I grew to appreciate their creativity and grit. But it did take time, and I sometimes had to deal with my own embarrassment in responding to people who asked me what the boys were up to. Nowadays, I feel extremely proud of them, although I still hate the special effects!

Personally, I am intensely curious about my children's' relationships, dreams and day-to-day experiences. Restraining myself from being intrusive, from satisfying my urge to know everything about their lives and activities, is an ongoing struggle. I was reminded of that yet again recently as my daughter left for her Year 10 formal in a limousine in the company of nine of her friends. It looked such fun that I had to restrain myself physically from climbing in and joining in. You can imagine just how welcome I would have been!

Letting go of that level of involvement so that they can experience their own independence and make their own mistakes is no easy feat. And it is particularly difficult when they still live under your roof with their struggles right in your face. I suspect that until they know that meaningful decisions and choices are really theirs to make that it is hard for young people to truly see themselves as adults. The reward is wonderful when you have times of open dialogue where they volunteer information about their schemes and dreams, confident in the knowledge that you will appreciate what they are doing, without feeling the need to win your approval.

There are situations where close scrutiny can seem crucial or is even legally sanctioned. That this can be problematic was poignantly illustrated for me just the other day. I met with Sonia whose support had ensured that her 32-year-old daughter, Nicole, managed to obtain custody of her three children. After the court verdict, Nicole and the children moved in 'temporarily' with Sonia, and are still living with her three years on. Nicole is a single parent with a long-term history of substance abuse who nevertheless, in her mother's view, is usually a good enough mother. Sonia is struggling to get her level of involvement and support for her daughter right. She feels happiest when she can see with her own eyes that the children are being fed, clothed and cared for. There are times when Nicole tolerates or even welcomes this level of involvement. At other times, she becomes angry and complains

that her mother treats her like a child. Sonia lives in dread that her daughter will sever the connection and that she will lose contact with her grandchildren. Sonia consulted a therapist because she was finding the volatility of her relationship with her daughter exhausting. She felt very responsible for her grandchildren and she was concerned that her style of mothering might be undermining her daughter's competence. Sonia's own personal and professional life had also ground to a halt as she poured all of her energies into her daughter's. Sonia was on the horns of a dilemma.

FOULING THE NEST

It was Jay Haley who many years ago wrote the seminal book on leaving home. He outlined the processes necessary for youngsters to effect this particularly significant transition. I am sure he refers, in other terms, to the notion of 'fouling the nest'. I wonder how much in many cases this is almost a necessary precursor to leaving home. If the nest was totally clean and comfortable maybe you would stay there indefinitely, never building your own.

I say this because so often parents report appalling, selfish behaviour on the part of their late adolescents, who might previously have been reasonably domesticated and pleasant to have around. It is a common complaint that 20 years olds can feel like 'users' – of the family car, the house as hotel, the fridge as their personal preserve.

I have been working with Jane for some time. Eighteen months ago, her daughter, Melissa (22), who had coped very well working as a waitress in New York, returned home to resume her studies. All of a sudden life became intolerable. Melissa had to commute to Uni, and so was too tired to clean or cook. She had her girlfriend staying in bed with her till lunchtime on a regular basis in a very small house. Generally, she made it hard for Jane

and her young son to relax in their own home. Jane did not want to seem old fashioned or jealous about her daughter's sexual activity, particularly as she is single herself. Eventually she found herself staying later and later at work to avoid conflict with her daughter.

In my experience this scenario is not uncommon. Many of us baby boomers moved out of home so that we could be sexually active. In that sense the restrictions of home had often become intolerable. With changed values in many families, it is now possible to be sexually active under your parents' roof. To effect the necessary transition of leaving home, it therefore becomes necessary for staying on to become an impossibility for other reasons. This is where I think fouling the nest comes in. Increased levels of conflict can provide a propellant, without which maybe many youngsters might find it difficult to leave.

Therapeutically, I have found that understanding this phenomenon in this way can remove some of the blaming that abounds. It has the advantage of helping parents to see that it is the very desirability of home that is behind such seemingly destructive, selfish, uncaring or otherwise negative responses in their child. In normalising the process of fouling the nest, it often makes it possible for parents and children to reconcile their differences more speedily and with less residual resentment.

HOMING PIGEONS

In 'Kath and Kim' Gina Riley, the thirty-something daughter, Kim, returns home to live with her mother, Kath, when Kim's marriage comes unstuck. Kath, in the midst of arrangements for a major transition of her own, namely remarriage, frequently falls into the trap of infantilising her daughter while Kim plays out the part of the negative, oppositional teen, often to riotous effect. At other times, the women form a peer-like

alliance. The instability of their relationship and the struggle to maintain a steady adult to adult connection is amusingly illustrated.

I am reminded of the cartoon where a thirty plus woman is driving home to visit her parents. As she enters their suburb she feels twenty five. As she drives into their street she reverts to twenty. As she walks up the driveway she reduces to fifteen, and as her parents open the front door she becomes eight. Herein lies one of the dilemmas that can affect young adults and parents when the youngsters return home to live. And this is even without considering the challenges that abound when young adults return home with their children in tow, as illustrated by the experience of Sonia and Nicole.

CONCLUSION

I hope you are now convinced that many of the dilemmas facing parents and adult children living together can be illustrated by reference to our feathered friends. Space does not permit a more exhaustive exploration of: Falling off the Perch, Birds of Prey, Cuckoos, Hen Pecking, Migration, Birds of a Different Feather, Dawn Chorus, Dodos, Spreading Wings, Pushing out of the Nest and Learning to Fly. I told you it was a long afternoon in the Anglesea pub!

This whole area of parenting young adults has the capacity to evoke acute feelings of uncertainty and isolation in parental breasts, travelling as we so often are without map or compass in uncharted waters. A couple of years on since that wet afternoon in Anglesea and with two of my children flown the coop, I now appreciate the common wisdom inherent in the notion of the empty nest. There are times when I miss the boys heaps and miss living in a youth club. Sometimes I think back on the struggles in our crowded nest and am amazed that it all felt so very difficult at the time. So, it is good to be reminded of

some of the complexities by Susannah McKinnon, an adult student still living at home, who recently wrote in the Age:

“The best advice I can offer is avoidance. Avoid your folks as often as possible. Don’t get up in the mornings until they have left for work. Don’t eat their food when they are around – they need reminding that you are still completely independent. And when your workload becomes highly demanding, let them know it’s stress time and you need all the space and patience from them in the world ... And maybe buy your mum some flowers every so often.”

* No real names have been used and all case material in this paper has been thoroughly disguised.

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