

Standing There Watching

by Jan Groft, *Lancaster Sunday News* (under the title “Lessons learned about letting go”), August 7 2011

It was muggy in Brooklyn that late August afternoon, the air closing in, making it hard to breathe. My husband and I huddled with our younger daughter, Katherine, behind the dorm where she would live as a college freshman. It was time to be on our way. Like a divine show of empathy, a crack of thunder was followed by a hard, driving downpour descending onto the parking lot.

The next day, I approached our garage for a grocery trip. To the right side of the flagstone walkway, two butterflies flitted around in circles, bumping into one another, as though they were lost, reminding me of the state in which my husband and I found ourselves. Having forgotten the grocery list, I hurried back into the house. When I returned, there on the other side of the walkway was a smaller butterfly, all by itself, soaring skyward. The sight of it overwhelmed me. Like the butterfly, my daughter was off with great purpose to accomplish something; still, it was hard letting go.

Years earlier, my older daughter had left home for her freshman year, so the pangs of separation were not new to me. They simply arrived by different couriers, such as the encounter with fresh vacuum cleaner streaks across the carpet of the empty bedroom. When this happened, I entered her room and stomped through the tidiness, and later lamented the event with my friend Eleanor, who told me of the day she’d taken her son away to college. Upon her return home, she discovered Alan’s napkin still at the breakfast table where he’d left it that morning. Eleanor sat at the table, picked up his napkin and wept into it.

In addition to separation, we are faced with the fear of not having imparted ample wisdom to send our children off to live apart from us. Would she board subways headed in the wrong direction? Would she take uncalculated risks? (Both of which, as an old cohort reminded me, I had done.)

My friend Martha, attempting to be proactive, tried to compensate throughout her daughter’s senior year of high school. And so, as they occurred to her, she found herself shouting tips up the stairs to her college-bound child.

“Caroline? Remember to use a plastic knife when cutting brownies!” (This apparently prevents sticking.)

Or, she shared that there are miniature bungee cords for keeping bed sheets tucked (to which her daughter replied, “Thanks, Mom, but I won’t be using bungee cords on my sheets”).

Our aching hearts cloud the fact that these are the same kids whose bicycles once had training wheels. Upon detaching the support, we ran alongside, but soon they were off exploring new paths, their T-shirts inflated by summer’s air, buoyant as balloons. Standing there watching, a parent is filled with celebration and mourning, pride and trepidation, for this is the moment when ends and beginnings meet up in a curious twist that requires a new vision of who we are and what our role is.

In April, I returned to the city to meet Katherine for dinner and a Broadway show. Shortly after we met, the rain began to fall, hard. Fortunately we’d both brought umbrellas. Hers was black; silk-screened inside were puffy, white clouds against a bright blue sky.

As evening approached, people crowded the sidewalks, their opened umbrellas butting against one another. Undaunted, my daughter marched through Times Square, jumping over puddles at each curb, and I followed, trusting she would lead us to our destination. Was this the same young woman whose

parents had had minimal logistical advice to offer about a city that, to this day, remains a mystery to them? As she jockeyed around street vendors and lines forming outside restaurants, the wind was blowing, rain swirling around us until a gust lifted her umbrella inside out. The pattern of clouds against sunny, blue sky rose like a butterfly, determined, and well on its way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jan Groft is the author of the award-winning book *As We Grieve*, and a memoir, *Riding the Dog*.