

## “Leaving the Nest”

One of the greatest benefits of where we live in Howe Farms, in a cul-de-sac with woods behind us, is the common opportunity to see the wildlife. Regularly, deer graze or sit in our neighbor's backyard, and also eat and play in the woods. The wild turkeys provide fascination which cannot be viewed in a more cosmopolitan area of town. While I am not an official ornithologist, a person who studies birds, I do enjoy watching them. Recognizing their instinctual nature, at times, I have become enthralled by their actions.

When we lived in Kenbridge, we had a family of birds which nested on our side porch and returned in the spring of the year to create homes *and* babies. Because our primary entrance/exit to our home was from that porch, with great interest I would watch their progress. Construction of their abode was an annual collection of whatever they could find in building a home; one year, the birds used a broken shoe string in their construction of the nest.

At about this time of year, I would notice the mother sitting on the eggs for some time, and finally we could hear the chirping of small baby birds. The mother and father birds also sang back to them while gazing up at the nest from our porch swing. With mouths wide open, the babies raised their skinny little necks in hopes of finding nourishment. I was amazed at how quickly they grew. The father bird, with a red chest, and the mother bird boasting black stripes on her gray chest feathers, both brought food to the babies. The day-to-day growth of the babies was like watching time-lapsed photography; we *literally* watched them grow. We could see the babies standing, one at a time, flapping furiously, raising their tail feathers and then sitting down. I had never seen the effort of baby birds preparing to leave the nest. Again, the mother and father birds returned with regularity placing food in the mouths of babes. It seemed that the intervals for feeding were more frequent as the offspring prepared for flight. While I never saw the mother bird *push* the babies from the nest, she obviously did, because one day the nest was empty. The babies had flown away.

The mother and the father had cared for their babies. The parents had built a home suitable for the needs of their offspring. The mother had sat on the eggs until they hatched. The parents had worked to find food and had placed the food in the babies' mouths. All the effort of *building* a home, *having* the babies, *feeding* and *protecting* them was for one purpose: to let them go. Hard for us to believe at times. The shoelace still hung from the nest; the nests built atop each other from successive years still rested on the inside of the porch post. But the babies were gone.

Many of you have seen *your* babies leave *your* nest. For years, you worked hard at making a decent home for them, one which provided safety and security for your offspring. You nurtured your children, filled their physical needs, sang to them when they felt alone, listened to their cries for help when they had needs. *Your* days were spent with *their* schedules in mind: working to provide food, placing the food in their mouths, and giving them the tools to fly. And then, they were gone.

Other parents still *have* babies in their nest. We continue to help them with choices, and we have to remind them at times in whose nest they are residing. Some offspring stand to flap their wings and raise their tail feathers long before they are ready to fly. They like the way it feels to stand up on their own, but they are still surrounded by the nest which was designed by their parents.

At times, the mother or father notices the bowed chest of the child and the itch for independence in their eyes, and then the parents are faced with the challenge. Let them fly too soon and expect disaster, or steady them on their feet before they fly. The intense wing-flapping sometimes is an effort by the baby to get the parent's attention. Yet the nest was fashioned by the parents, giving the offspring room for wing-flapping without harm.

Birds are instinctual creatures; humans are not. We have to *think* about *what* we are doing and

*why* we are doing it. Parenting is somewhat instinctual, in that we generally repeat patterns of our own mothers and fathers. But as parents we have a choice: raise our children exactly the way our parents reared us or make some modifications. While the responsibilities of parenting are almost as plentiful as the stars in the sky, the ultimate goal in parenting is to let the children go. Seems paradoxical to me, even as I say it. Our unconditional love for our children is intended for *their* own good; *making* them responsible, *teaching* them values and *providing* a safe and secure environment gives our children the tools they need to fly. What we do *today* is directed to when our children leave the nest *tomorrow*. Yet like the birds, we cannot let the children go too soon; that is why we are *parents*.

I am not an advocate of child neglect or allowing children to raise themselves. I can think of no greater disservice to a child than a parent ignoring him/her. Wanting kids out of the nest when they are not ready is not the child's fault; the error rests with the parents. The mother and father birds returned with food rather than allowing the hunger of the babies to force them into a dangerous environment before they were ready.

I am also not an advocate of smothering a child and holding them in the nest when they are ready to fly. Keeping a child dependent upon a parent *colors* later relationships as well. Not allowing the child to grow up, making all the decisions for them and refusing to acknowledge a need for independence *stifles* the offspring and snuffs their fulfillment.

When the eggs hatched, the mother bird did not continue to sit on the babies, and as the babies got bigger, the mother was not with them all the time. She and the father still brought them food, but the maturation process was gradual and appropriate. When the babies were ready to fly, neither parent placed an insurmountable obstacle around the nest to keep the babies close. For us, loving our children means *preparing* them, and then, letting them go.

The goal in parenting is to *ready* the children to leave the nest. Although we have *given* them names, *provided* for their needs, been the chief *molders* of their character, and taught them how to *do* family, our primary goal is to let our children go. Our discipline is to teach them how to make decisions for themselves. As parents, we have the opportunity to give back to God what has been given to us. How we *parent* our children, what we *do* as mothers and fathers should also be gifts to God. Our children are *gifts* to us from God; how we *treat* the gift is reflective of what we hope the *result* will be. The goal in parenting is to let the children go.

Hannah longed terribly to have a baby. Her husband Elkanah had another wife who had many children. Life was difficult for Hannah. She prayed for a child, and made a vow to give the child back to God *all* the days of his life. In return for God's gift of a son, Hannah promised to set him aside for lifelong service as a Nazarite, which included an outward expression of not cutting his hair (Numbers 6:1-8) A Nazarite vow was taken by those who separated themselves totally to the Lord. Hannah was willing to forego the normal family obligations which a child owed his parents. (Broadman Bible Commentary vol. 3. Ben F. Philbeck, Jr. Nashville: Broadman Press. 1970. p. 14.)

Not knowing that she would have other children, Hannah was *forfeiting* her own future care; her oldest child would have taken care of her in her later years. Having a child was so important to her that she would *physically*, not just figuratively, give the child back to God. Giving her child back to God was an act of faith.

Hannah gave birth to a son, and she named him Samuel, which means "asked of God." Hannah was a person of her word. Can you imagine the bitter-sweetness when she remembered that vow and looked into the eyes of her infant? How difficult it must have been for this saintly lady to make this offer, to give up her present joy of watching him grow, to relinquish the security of her aging years, and then to keep the vow she made. Having her son, "young as he was" as the author of I Samuel records, leave the nest was more stressful than for parents today. Yet her primary allegiance was to God, the one who gave her the son. She loved Samuel, but she loved God more.

Samuel was probably about three-years-old before he was taken to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. This was the customary age for weaning in the ancient world. (*Ibid*, p. 15) She committed to do what she could; certainly, Eli the priest could not *nurse* the boy. Hannah carried Samuel for nine months, raised him until he was three knowing all along that she would release him when he was weaned. Her parenting was focused; everything she did was for the good of the child. Her primary parental concentration was equipping her child to let him go. Her attitudes, desires, and discipline were all filtered through the idea of him leaving the nest. Hannah could not afford to *scar* the child by treating him otherwise.

The most loving action she could offer her young Samuel was to parent him with the knowledge that one day he would leave her nest. Her motivation and training converged on the day she would allow him to leave. For his first three years, she gave him bricks labeled homelife and traditions, manners and relating, family and godly behavior that built a foundation on which Eli the priest could construct his character. Taking Samuel to the house of the Lord was maybe the most *unselfish* act that Hannah could commit. Her fulfillment of the vow to give Samuel back to God was an act of faith, knowing that God would take care of her only son.

For those of us parents today who still have children at home, we can learn *volumes* from Hannah. How would your parenting change if you knew your child would leave you in three years? What would you want your child to know about you and your ancestry? About the family traditions you hope that he/she continues? About being a parent? How would you prioritize what you hope your child will take from you?

And now ask, why should your parenting be any different from Hannah's? Our children are only with us for a season. Rearing our kids is a limited-time offer. What we need to teach them has to be done within a certain time-frame, because our children will leave regardless. I know you join me in wanting your children prepared to leave and to live independently.

In reference to Samuel, Hannah told Eli the priest, "For his whole *life* he will be given over to the Lord." Isn't that what *we* should be saying? Today, we are to do *figuratively* what Hannah did *literally*. We are to give our children over to God for their entire life. To do so, we start early; if you have never done so, then start today. The greatest goal in parenting is preparing the child to let him/her go. When our children leave the nest, it is the responsibility of the parents to have them ready.

Our children's lives are better if parents work ourselves out of a job. As a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, one of Jennifer's goals with clients is to work herself out of a job with each individual or family. She tries to help them cope with their problems and deal with the reality of their lives until they do not need her help. *Parenting* shares that same principle. By equipping our children for their futures independent of their parents, we have given them life.

Jesus said it this way, "We gain life by giving it away." This principle applies to our parenting. As mothers and fathers, we give our lives in preparation of our children leaving us. Parenting is probably the greatest challenge with the most extensive dividends. When we parent our children with the knowledge that one day they will leave the nest, we give them life by giving away our own lives.

Personally, I do not yet know what it is like to launch my children; I'll find out in just over a year. But I am convinced that I will give my children a better life by giving mine away. One of the best ways I can exhibit love to my children is to prepare them for the day when they leave the nest.

So on this Mother's Day, remember that our actions today pay dividends tomorrow. Loving our children requires us to prepare them for life *away* from us. The goal of parenting is to let the children go. And remember, on this Mother's Day, after we have done all that, leave everything else with God.