



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Hey, parents... we survived another back-to-school week! The #2 pencils have been sharpened, the backpacks stuffed, the endless forms filled out and the dreaded uniforms tucked in.

And that was the easy part.

This annual passage is always fraught with emotion, isn't it? Despite a sense of relief that our kids are back on a schedule – which means we can be, too – there's always this wistful feeling that summer has passed too quickly, that it's sifted through our fingers like so much Hunting Island sand. If you're like me, you didn't do everything you wanted to do. Not enough beach days... not enough bike rides... not enough walks in the moonlight, catching fireflies. (Okay, none of those.) Sure, there will be another summer – there's always another summer – but when it comes, your kids will be one year older – one year more attached to their friends and their smart phones... one year less attached to you.

I'm always moved by the first-day photos people post on Facebook. It's fun to follow the kids whose parents you knew as kids – a little taller each year, a little thinner (or fatter), a little more like their parents, a little more like themselves. The adolescents get to me, especially. There's something poignant about these not-quite-grown children, awkward in their school uniforms – or not, if they're lucky and live somewhere besides here – with their familiar expressions of hope and dread and wary optimism. You just want to wrap your arms around them and pull them close. "It'll be okay," you want to tell them. "There's nothing to fear," you want to say. But you were in middle school and high school once, and you know you'd be fudging the truth.

At our house, there are big goings-on this fall. Our daughter is in 7th grade and will be taking Algebra I. This means the difficulty of her homework should officially exceed my ability to help her with it. (I think I said that last year, but Pre-Algebra was not the bear I expected. Even better, Amelia hardly ever needed help.) As she faces new academic challenges, she'll face new physical ones as well. We just bought her first pair of toe shoes, and she'll be learning to dance en pointe, a major milestone. I confess, this nags at my worry bone – have you seen what happens to the feet of ballerinas? – but my daughter is serious about dance, so I can only be smiley and supportive and ready to rub. It's all part of the long letting go... that great heartbreak of parenthood that is also its great joy.

My daughter is nothing like me; her talents and passions have never been my own. While I'm smitten with words, in love with ideas, enamored of esoterica, and most at home in my head, she is earthy and practical and good with her hands, with a knack for numbers and a disdain for books. While I'm sensitive and emotional and quick to cry, she is gutsy and wise-cracking, rarely sentimental. As she grows older, she becomes even more like herself and less like me. I once found this obstinate *separateness* problematic – even painful – but I am now coming to marvel at it. For it is in this space between us – this place where we don't overlap, where I cast no shadow – that wondrous surprises sprout and bloom like wildflowers. Where, for instance, did this dance thing come from? Certainly not me! I was a clumsy lummock of a girl. Her dad played baseball in his youth, but nothing about him screams "dance" either. Or even whispers it. It's all hers. We can only nurture it. And what a delight to watch it grow! To watch
her
grow.

That's the ecstasy *and* the agony, isn't it? Watching them grow . . . away from us? Away from who we are toward who they'll be?

And you never really know if you're doing your part properly. . . if you're making the right choices for them. At least I don't. I saw a friend out walking his dog yesterday – a nice guy I've known for years – and I remembered that he and his wife homeschool their children. Lots of folks do these days. They just opt out of the "program" entirely – something I might be tempted to do if I were certain I had a better program to offer, and were competent to do so. And then there are all the charter schools springing up – first Riverview, now Bridges, and next year we'll have Lowcountry Montessori. Each has a different approach to education, and none are the same approach used by the homeschooling parents. (Come to think of it, *they* have several approaches, too!) It's all very confusing for an amateur parent like me. My daughter's always attended a plain ol' public school – just like I did – but times (and public education) have changed, and I have no idea if I'm doing right by her. She makes good grades and seems well

adjusted, but she listens to way too much Justin Bieber and spends an awful lot of time straightening her hair. Especially for a girl with straight hair. Would things be different if I homeschooled her . . . or would that just give her more quality time with her flat iron?

The unsettling thing is that I'm not quite sure what to dream for my child. I'm told there was a time in this country when parents all dreamed in unison . . . or some semblance thereof. They wanted their children to get a good education, find a decent job, work hard, put down roots, marry somebody nice, have children of their own, and raise them up to start the cycle all over again. The idea was that within that general framework, all manner of personal quirks could be accommodated, interests pursued, and sufferings eased – however imperfectly – and a meaningful life could be lived. Today, not only have we, as a culture, reconsidered that paradigm . . . but it seems our parental expectations – even in the short term – are all over the place, as well. Some parents are all about *"Work harder, push yourself, climb the ladder, be the best!"* while others are more *"Follow your bliss, find yourself, explore your options, just be happy..."*

Most of the time, I fall somewhere in between. I want my daughter to know the joy of striving and excelling . . . but not at the expense of other joys – friendship, family, and just plain fun.

The hardest part of parenting, I think, is that subtle switcheroo that has to happen – though you're never sure when, exactly – whereby the parent begins to follow the child's lead, instead of vice versa. At some point, we must learn to softly trail behind, in the direction of their choosing – ready to gently prod them forward, or catch them if they fall, but no longer leading them down our own preferred paths. In a world where values are shifting and the old ways receding like a waning tide, parenthood can feel like a trek through a dense forest without any guideposts. So many paths to choose from, so little visibility ahead. All you can do is hack away at the undergrowth, enjoy the dappled sunlight, sing some happy traveling songs, and hope you're on the right trail. Or a good one, anyway. (Who knows what "right" means anymore?)

So, dear parents, as another school year begins . . . here's to us! The brave, the stalwart, the perpetually confused. May we follow our hearts, our heads, our guts – and, the hardest part, our children – with all the wit and wisdom we can muster. And may we only second-guess ourselves a few times a day.

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