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Lessons in Letting Go **by Laura Remmerde**

Jon and I were astonished as we sat listening to Juniper, our eldest daughter, patiently give us simple, clear instructions on the art of communicating with her.

"When you ask a question, don't say it in a way that can be answered yes or no. Use these three words: how, what, why."

Jon and I looked at each other. After 18 years of communicating adequately with our daughter, she was telling us we could do a better job.

She continued to press her point. "You're always saying that I don't tell you enough lately, but you have to ask questions in a way that will leave the doors open for a reply."

"This is remarkable," I thought. "Our daughter is showing more maturity than we are."

"OK," I said. I was willing to make an adjustment in the way I phrased a question, if it would help. "What kind of steps did you learn in dance class today?"

I think I'm getting more adept at phrasing my questions. It's important to me to keep communicating with Juniper. And I keep thinking that there ought to be classes for parents who are nearing parental retirement. It's not an easy transition.

These days, I am no longer the teacher. I am the student in a rapidly changing classroom. This relationship, which started out with me carrying her on my back, helping her over puddles no larger than a dinner plate, and teaching her how to read and write, has switched now, like a picture in which the foreground suddenly becomes the background. Overnight, Juniper is striding into the foreground while I stand back to watch her take charge of her life. This is a natural transition, so it ought to be easy, but it isn't. The lessons for a suddenly retired mother pile up over the months, and so do the questions.

For instance, when I ask Juniper to phone before she starts up the hill from Fort Collins in the evening, after her dance class, am I being a worried mother again, or is this a reasonable request? Juniper thinks this is evidence that I'm worrying too much. I disagree. When the family car is an '81 Chevy with thousands of miles on it and a cooling system that only operates

because of Stop Leak, I prefer to know when people begin the 45-mile trek home.

I try to remember how I felt about going anywhere when I was Juniper's age. I do remember. Cars were reliable machines, and my friends and I were reliable individuals. We could handle any problems we encountered, and we didn't encounter any. This is how Juniper feels, too.

"The car only leaks when you drive it. It likes me. When the radio's on, it buzzes when there's a policeman around, and the other night the 'check engine' light went on just in time for me to see a hare in the road. When I slowed down for it, the light went off and didn't come on again the whole trip!"

I'm sure these revelations are intended to be comforting, and it's true that she has developed more rapport with the car than any of us over the preceding months. She's been driving to the community college down the mountain through snow, sleet, hail, and rain, and she hasn't missed a class despite my encouragements to do so on some mornings.

I should rejoice in these signs of independence and responsibility, and I do. She filled out numerous college applications for next year, completed financial-aid forms alone, investigated (and secured) a job at a local Morgan horse farm in exchange for riding lessons, and found a summer job. As I look at this evidence piling up, doesn't it mean that it's time for me to respect these signs of maturity? It is a profound egotism that makes us think we can live for our children, or that they would even want us to.

"Treat her like a 35-year-old beloved house guest," Jon suggests one day when I am bending his ear about the situation. I think about this advice all evening when I think of Juniper. I try to envision her not as my daughter but as a cherished 35-year-old friend who has come for a breezy visit to share her exciting life with us. It's easy until the next day when I'm cleaning house and encounter Juniper's "file" - a kitchen chair in the dining room overflowing with letters from colleges, notes to herself about homework and work assignments, a star chart, a fishing-tackle box, a "Field Guide to American Wildlife," stationery, and other items buried too deep to analyze. My policy with this chair has been "hands off," but I find myself wondering if this can really be the file of that 35-year-old house guest Jon talked about.

I can't complain, however. She might have learned this method from me. The four corners of our kitchen table hold piles of newspapers, half-finished letters, dictionaries, various

books and magazines, and notes to ourselves exhorting action on college deadlines, calling friends, or writing projects. We make periodic attempts to clear the table, and the person clearing it inevitably throws away the very note that is most needed.

One of the colleges mentioned in the notes sent a pamphlet to parents of incoming freshmen. This pamphlet is an effort to prepare parents for the shock of realizing that their children are now adults. The pamphlet encourages parents to let their older children make their own mistakes with homework and life problems, gently advises them not to visit too often, and by all means to call before they visit. "Did you read that?" Juniper asks, when I (again) ask one question too many.

Yes, I did. And while I find myself making progress with this "letting go" process, I also find that my progress isn't as fast as hers. It has more the pattern of two steps forward and one step back than full steam ahead. If I were in a "parental-retirement class," I'm not sure what my grade would be. Some days I wonder if I have a grade. The opportunities for being too involved, or for asking too many questions, (or not enough of the right kind), occur daily, sometimes hourly.

I catch glimpses of what life will be like when I get through the "class." I'm discovering that the sense of freedom and expanding horizons isn't just for Juniper. There's a feeling of release when I'm able to step aside and realize that Juniper can take charge of her own life. I have a sense of newness and of fresh possibilities. I feel as if life is starting over, and I have more to offer than I haven't fully discovered.

These rewarding feelings aren't always tangible in the tangle of sorting through what is and isn't my responsibility now, but the glimpses I've had of them assure me that valuable lessons are included in this present experience, lessons that will open up new possibilities for both of us, for our future apart, and for our communication together.