

Reward and Punishment in Equal Measure

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I was thinking earlier in the week that perhaps this article was a little self-indulgent and I should write about another topic, one more broadly experienced by all the good people in Caledon, not just by me. Then it occurred to me it's very likely I am not alone in my thoughts and feelings this week. That in fact, there is a very good chance at least a few of you are experiencing the same kind of change I am about to experience.

My 'little one' is not so little anymore and is about to fly the coop and I would like to know why the reward for good parenting feels so much like a damn punishment?

There are many pivotal moments as a parent, but the two most significant ones have to be the day you bring your baby home from the hospital and your life changes forever and the day your baby leaves home and your life changes forever - again.

The word 'pivot' has taken on special significance during this pandemic, with so many of us continually turning, rotating or changing to meet fluctuating public health demands, but never has pivot had more significance for me than right now. I am now required to disassemble all of the various tools and strategies built up over almost 23 years of parenting, and to pivot and reassemble them in a different order now as the parent of someone who no longer lives at home. I think you'll agree that none of us are fully equipped when our babies first come home, but there are plenty of 'What To Expect?' parenting books to help us along the way. There is no manual, however, for what to expect when your baby leaves home for what is likely to be the very last time save for the occasional visit.

My son is moving across the country. He isn't just leaving, he's going to be a very, very long drive (or plane ride if that day ever comes) away. He begins a full time job, with benefits, something hard to obtain in his chosen field. So, of course, we are thrilled for him. He graduated recently with an impressive overall average and he and his various friends are all off to start their lives, full of promise and adventure and why shouldn't they be? Perhaps these graduates, having taught themselves to some degree during this pandemic year, are better prepared than ever to face life's challenges. This is all good news but again, I ask my fellow parents in the same position why do I feel like my reward for playing at least a small role in his success thus far, is the punishment of losing him to the larger world and not having easy access to his amazing hugs, his thoughtfulness, his kindness and to him.

I imagine there are many parents out there now, or in the very near future, watching cars pull out of driveways, not for the last time but at least for a very long time before a visit 'back home' takes place. My son's brilliant and beautiful girlfriend, soon launching her own career too, is joining him in this cross-country adventure and we couldn't be happier. No doubt, however, her mom feels much the same as I do today, and no doubt how many of you are feeling too. A mixture of feeling a little lost, a lot heartsick, probably happy, proud, sad and glad and every other emotion all at the same time. It's a lot to process. The adjustment, similar to when we first brought our babies home, will be fast and furious. The only difference is this time, instead of a baby's cries and laughter and demands for food and baby gates and car seats and toys all over the house; this time your adjustment will be how to cope with the silence, the empty bedroom and what to do with those arms that first carried, then cuddled, then hugged and now can only wave enthusiastically as we hide our tears and send them on their way.

Still, I can't really complain. Due to the pandemic, as hard as it has been on our young adults, I've been given the gift of a 'bonus' year. Studying from home during their final year, and joined by my daughter also studying from home for her first year of university, we've been luckier than some and able to enjoy some great family time together. So, I shouldn't be selfish and expect more. For better or worse I've done all the parenting I can and I'm happy for my kids to go out and experience the world.

I write this now, relatively easily, but with my daughter also due to leave home in just a month or two and only our pandemic rescue puppy to keep me company at home, there's a pretty good chance you'll find me curled up in the fetal position, sipping wine straight from the bottle through a straw. Not sure if that's a reward, or a punishment?