



## Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

### Loving and letting go

*“Making the decision to have a child is momentous.*

*It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”*

*Elizabeth Stone*

Years ago, I was at the dentist’s office getting my teeth cleaned when I heard some parenting advice that has stayed with me.

My daughters were young at the time, and as the dental hygienist talked about her 16 year old, I quizzed her about that stage of life.

*How do you handle the growing independence?*

*How do you know how much rope to give?*

*How do you deal with the fear of bad things happening when she’s away?*

After all, it’s one thing to send your child off to kindergarten or even summer camp — quite enough to send them off to college or a Friday night outing with teenage friends.

The dental hygienist thought a moment. “It’s hard,” she replied. “Sometimes you just have to say a prayer and let them go.”

Her answer satisfied the many questions in my head — prayer. What else can ease a parent’s deepest anxieties? What else can keep one centered in moments of stress, doubt and fear of the unknown?

In the dentist’s chair that day, I realized something important. While prayer was already part of my life, it would play a bigger role over time. Because the only way to handle my kids growing up would be to let my prayer life grow up with them.

They say parenting is about giving children roots and wings. I believe another way to frame this is to say that parenting is about loving and letting go. The irony, of course, is how these aspirations conflict. As parents, we wrestle with that. We must figure out, somehow, the best way to strike a balance.

We want to hold our children close, but we don’t want to hold them back.

We want to love them wholeheartedly, but loving wholeheartedly makes it harder to set them free.

We dream about their future and what awaits them, but when they leave, it creates an ache in our heart and a terrible void at home.

When my girls were small, I couldn’t peel them off me with a spatula. There was always someone sitting on my hip, hanging on my leg or pulling my arm. Letting go of them wasn’t the issue because I needed someone to let go of me. Some days I loved the clinging, but other days I needed space. I wanted room to breathe and freedom to walk without tripping over tiny tots and toys.

Now that my girls are older — ages 12, 10, 8 and 5 — the dynamic has changed. While they still love to cuddle and be affectionate, they no longer tear me apart like a rotisserie chicken, competing for the biggest piece of momma. They can play with their friends for hours, come to me for a snack or quick conversation, then go play for three more hours. When they’re not with me, they’re with someone I know and trust.

Slowly our lives are separating, yet we still spend lots of time together. They still share details about their day, ask for my opinion, and enjoy reading and praying together before bed.

They know my world and I know theirs because our two worlds overlap.

I know what’s coming, however, in the next five years: more letting go than I’m ready for. A certain reality has hit me hard with my oldest starting junior high, and my Facebook feed filled with parents posting pictures of kids getting their driver’s licenses, going to prom, receiving college acceptance letters, graduating in caps and gowns, decorating dorm rooms, being left at college, pledging sororities and fraternities, and starting independent adult lives.

My daughters aren’t too far away from these rites of passage. What once seemed distant is now around the corner. Time is marching on, turning my baby girls into young ladies.

I’d like to freeze us here in this magical sweet spot of childhood, but God has plans for my daughters that require them to grow up. And if I truly love them, I’ll think a lot about God’s plans. I’ll ask how I can help. Because that’s my role as their mother, to help God accomplish His mission and help my daughters hear His voice.

I’ve enjoyed seeing my daughters grow up. I’ve loved watching their personalities and talents develop and engaging with them as real people. Deep down, however, I’m uncomfortably aware of what all this growth and activity are leading to. I won’t always be in the middle of the action. My home won’t always be the busy, noisy hub that it is today.

I could easily get sad about this, but I try to be grateful. Grateful I’m alive to see my daughters grow up. Grateful for today’s abundance. Grateful for God’s work in my girls’ lives that becomes increasingly evident with every birthday we celebrate.

Loving a child comes naturally. Letting a child go does not. Knowing when to protect and when to release requires divine wisdom. We give our children roots not to keep them home forever, but to draw them back home. Because roots help them live bravely. Roots assure them they have nothing to lose in testing their wings. Whatever happens, they’re guaranteed unconditional love. They have an open invitation to come back home.

To love a child is to let them steal your heart. It’s to feel an intense tug in your heart as your child walks away. You wonder whether you’ve prepared them enough. You worry that maybe you haven’t. You pray over your lack of control, and ultimately turn it over to God.

We mothers learn to live with our hearts outside our chests. We watch our children carry off different pieces of our heart as they explore their independence. *But our greatest peace occurs when our kids are back together under our roof, bringing our heart back together, too.*

These are the moments that make letting go remotely bearable. These are the moments that remind us of how the pain of an absence creates the joy of reunion, and how home is wherever our family unites together.

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