

# The Short Good-bye ~ Creating a Ritual to “Send Off” a College-Bound Daughter

By Sabrina Gross

“I don’t have time, I need to see my friends,” followed by “I can’t wait to get out of here (!),” echoed through our house as the door slammed behind our 18 year old daughter. As I looked around at the disarray of possessions poised to be tossed into boxes, I was starting to agree with her.

The last few weeks before our oldest daughter left for college was a throwback to those mental inventory days before she was born. Does she have what she’ll need to navigate the months ahead? Are we ready for this new stage? We had made the requisite trips to Bivouac for a water bottle and hiking boots, ran around Running Fit in a new pair of shoes, and stopped at Zingerman’s on the way home. I realized that this big transition was starting to look like a “Is that all there is?” moment.

In June, we had thrown an “Open House” for her. By August, we didn’t want to admit that we were pretty tired of her and had started to imagine what it would be like to have a break from each other. There was also this little

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voice reminding us, “This is the last vacation we’ll take together as a family” and “This is the last time she’ll make us really angry”.

I had attended a friend’s daughter’s Bat Mitzvah that spring. The ceremony was such a celebration of the girl’s talents. The rabbi spoke for several minutes about the honoree, waxing on about her motivation, demeanor, intelligence, and perseverance. I felt some jealousy that our daughters would never have a public passage like this as they moved to adolescence. Sure, sports banquets and music recitals note an adolescent’s achievement, but not in such a personal, resounding way.

I had spoken to friends that had transported their college freshman on move-in day and knew that this was a thankless task on a hot day, with no moments to relay our caring.

I presented this quandary to our family’s counselor, Carole Kirby. She suggested a “send off” for our daughter, which sounded like a harsh kick. Carole then dove into the emotions that were ricocheting around our family and helped us see the advantages to a ceremonial parting.

When a young adult leaves for college or some other reason (a job, an adventure or military service), our culture doesn’t have a traditional ritual that marks this transition.

On the one hand, parents are ready for their young adult to leave the nest. On the other hand, they may fear losing a sense of purpose and importance when their young adult child moves on. They are beginning to realize that their son or daughter will never be home again in the same way. Sometimes, either the parents or the young person

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- Natalie Gross, daughter of the author

may create disconnection, making it easier to separate. This is not the best way to manage the uncomfortable feelings either may be having.

For the young adult leaving home, they, too, have a mixture of contrasting feelings. “It’s so exciting. It can’t

come fast enough.” This conflicts with “I’m not ready to leave the familiarity of home, neighborhood, friends, and family.”

“What if I crash and burn, can’t make the grade...?” “Who chose this particular college anyway?” These contradictory feelings make sense, as this is a major life transition, for the person leaving home as well as for the parents. Carole encouraged us to plan a Send Off as a conscious ceremony or ritual that would give all family members an opportunity to express their feelings of pride, loss, sadness, fond memories, and good wishes. We realized that waiting until the night before was probably not the best transition, so it would require a little preparation for it to be a positive experience.

### What to do in advance

*The parents or guardian sets the stage by speaking to the student leaving and getting some “buy in”. Let them read this article. Give everyone a few days notice, so they can prepare for the send off. Find 1 to 2 hours that everyone can be present and discussion can flow in an open-ended way. No cell phones, TV or other interruptions.*

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*Ask all the family members to give some thought to what they might share and possibly have a small token (not a gift) to give to the person leaving. Another option might be for the person leaving to give something to each family member as well – again just a token from your household, not another trip to the store.*

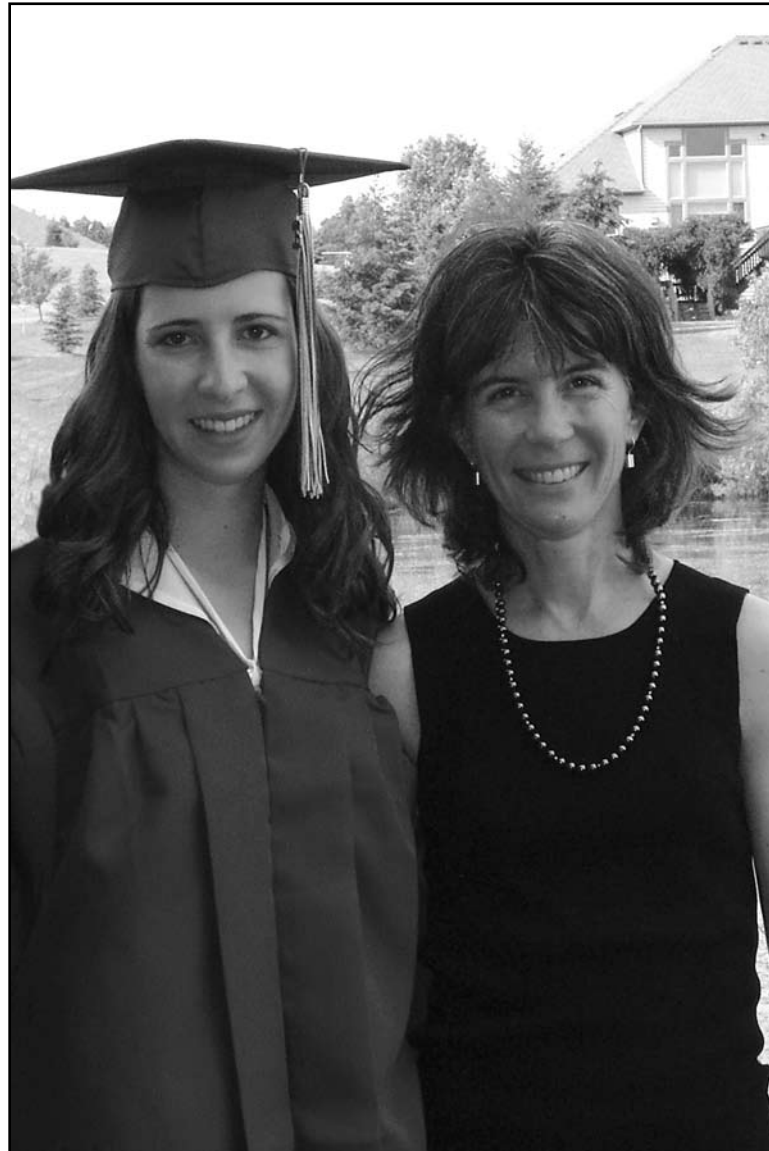
*I would strongly suggest having this discussion in a fairly private place, ideally in your home. It’s fun to plan a meal out with an extended family or some other gathering, but setting aside 1 to 2 hours to discuss what this leave-taking will mean for everyone that lives in the household should be done without interruptions from wait staff or trying to entertain others. If you want to eat afterwards, great, but the food preparation should not be the focus.*

### **The Leaving Home Family Ritual**

1. Each person in the family recalls and shares a brief experience with the person leaving home, perhaps a fond memory from age 12 and under
2. Then another memory from 12 and older.
3. Then each person shares a challenging time or experience they had with the person leaving.
4. Then a funny experience ...
5. Then what I won’t miss about the person leaving.
6. What I will miss most about the person leaving.
7. Then the person leaving speaks to each sibling and to each parent using as many of the suggestions above as they choose, making sure that they include what they will miss most about each person.

Use these suggestions as a take off point for your planning. It can be more unstructured, but if you don’t take time for reflection in advance, it won’t happen.

Our family chose to have our leaving home ritual about a week before she left. Our emotions poured out at varying times, but we found the next few days to be more relaxed as we focused on the necessary tasks to be accomplished before her departure.



Sabrina Gross and her daughter, Natalie.

When I asked our daughter what she thought about this leaving experience, she sent me these comments: “Although I was quite skeptical initially of what seemed to be another strange exercise, I grudgingly concede that it had some benefits. I remember that before it occurred I had been dreading it for days, as I knew that it would force me to actually acknowledge the fact that I was going to college (I was terrified). Also, I knew that it would result in a great deal of crying, which I had been attempting to hold off for many weeks.”

“I’m not sure if the ceremony helped me achieve the magic of closure as I left for college, or made it any easier to leave my family. However, I am quite happy, so perhaps it did. One significant thing that it did accomplish was that it allowed all of us to say what we wanted to say.”

“It still makes me tear up when I remember my sister saying that what she would miss the most with me gone was, simply, “her best friend.” The words of my parents and sisters cemented for me that I was loved, and would continue to be loved and missed when I was no longer at the dinner table each night.”

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Local Therapist Carole Kirby helped Sabrina Gross create the *Leaving Home* Family Ritual. Kirby is a certified *Imago* therapist and workshop presenter. She offers **Getting the Love You Want Weekend Workshop for Couples** and **Keeping the Love You Find Workshop for Individuals** in Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids, Michigan. She has been a therapist for 25 years and now practices in Ann Arbor. <http://www.therapy4couples.com/>