

Partings

by [Nancy Mairs](#) in the [June 17, 1998](#) issue

All good things must come to an end," Mother used to intone whenever, as a small girl, I balked at leaving off some delightful activity or grieved at the departure of a favorite guest.

Ours is a family given to truisms of this sort: handsome is as handsome does; it never rains but it pours; the apple never falls far from the tree; in the dark all cats are gray. These once maddened me, but now I can see that some do actually hint at cosmic truths. All things good and bad--life itself, that ultimate mixed blessing--must indeed come to an end.

We are in essence transitory beings. The other day I heard a radio interview with a biologist who insisted that death is scientifically unnecessary and that before long we will discover how to live forever.

I shuddered. Although I can't imagine what creatures might emerge as a result of immortality, I feel sure that they wouldn't be human. Our humanity, for better and worse, depends upon limits and loss.

Even though Mother's bromide was meant as reassurance, partings have always panicked me. At four, I'm told, I resisted leaving Guam because my daddy had gone to heaven there and I would not abandon him. About to begin college, I penned in my diary: "But to leave, to say with finality, goodbye old life that I have always known, goodbye house, town, family, love--oh this is pain and panic and bewilderment far wilder than I have ever known." Over time, my feelings have lost their hysterical edge, but I continue to crave stasis and continuity in both my routine and my relationships.

Lately, I've been wrenched from my stolidity by a series of circumstantial shifts, the most grievous being the departure of my daughter and her family to Denver. In more than 30 years, we've sent Anne off many times to a variety of destinations, including summer camp, college and the Peace Corps. Until now, however, Tucson has remained her permanent address and so she has somehow "belonged" here. No

longer.

I don't suffer from empty-nest syndrome. I have never sighed, like my mother-in-law, "Life is never as good after the children have gone." In fact, partly as a result of watching my children strike off on their own, life has never been better. A saying I came across when they were little has stayed with me: "There are but two things we can give our children. One is roots, the other wings." Now that they've fledged, I don't want them back in the nest; they'd be too big for it.

Since we had never expected Anne to return to Tucson, the past eight years have been pure bounty. During them, we have seen Anne complete a master's degree and her husband finish medical school at the University of Arizona. We've witnessed their marriage and the birth of their son, thrilling to his every wail and giggle. We've logged hours playing bridge and watching basketball games, taken care of each other's dogs, exchanged gifts, recipes, advice, gossip, colds. We'll continue to visit a couple of times a year, but it's the easy intimacy of neighbors that I mourn.

A few months ago, I wrote an essay in which I suggested people should never possess anything they cannot bear to live without. This is sound enough counsel for the objects I had in mind, but it doesn't quite work for people.

I can't let Anne, Eric and Colin go as I have a featherbush, a wicker basket. My father has been dead for more than 50 years, but I have never let him go. On the contrary, after Mother assured me that heaven was overhead wherever I went, I took him along, and he has flourished in my head and heart ever since. My newly departed children, separated only by distance and not by death, will simply now join him there. Thanks to them, my awareness has stretched further than I could have anticipated.

"Between God and me there is no 'Between,'" Meister Eckhart observed. Believing as I do that God is the Whole of It, that our every atom bears God into being, I cannot experience myself as truly apart. Between me and my children, my father, the little lizard skittering about my studio, the very first blossom on the young desert willow outside my door, there is no Between.

The ghostly presence of those for whom I've composed these essays has also kept me company. That ghostly presence has helped me achieve focus at a time when my ideas have seemed, like my actions, especially scattered. I hope I've given something in return. Between you and me there is no Between.