

When a child leaves

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue



Students gather on St. Olaf's campus. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Tatiana12](#).

We just took our son Karl to St. Olaf College for his freshman year. It was hard for me, scary and exciting for him, and wounding for his mother.

I've been his stepfather for ten years. and he's been woven into the fabric of my life. But my grief at his leaving is different from his mother's. I think of this transition as a necessary loss of which I am proud. He got into a good school and will embark on a series of challenges that will help him find his life. "That's the way growing up in our society works," I think. His mother agrees, but she already acutely feels the loss of not having his dirty socks to pick up.

Part of what fascinates me about this dynamic is that she took the lead in helping him find the right school. Two years ago she bought copies of books like *America's Best Colleges* and went to the seminars offered by Karl's guidance counselors on college preparation. I went on a couple of the college tours, but she hauled him around the country for most of them and did a second round after he was accepted into his top schools. The evening he decided to go to St. Olaf, she eagerly took a picture of him wearing a new St. Olaf T-shirt. She made a long list of things he would need for college, accompanied him on countless trips to Target, shipped his new stuff to school, and helped him prepare his dorm room after we arrived. All of it was

a deeply satisfying, joyful experience of being his mom.

The last couple of weeks before he left, Karl was nervous that he would not perform well at college, that everyone there would be smarter than he, and that he'd have to work too hard, go on to grad school, and never again have any fun. These are the feelings of a 19-year-old. Through it all his mother consoled and reassured him. He had no idea she was nudging him to rip out her heart and take it halfway across the country.

She held up pretty well as we made our way through the various events of new student orientation. It was particularly helpful that St. Olaf had a worship service for parents and students just before we drove to the airport. We sang a hymn that began with the notation that all should sing in harmony on the first verse. I was confused by the ordering of the verses, but my wife said that she appreciated beginning with harmony, which is an entanglement of voices, and then moving on to have the parents sing a verse alone, followed by students singing alone on the third verse. Finally, on the fourth verse, we found our unison voice, no longer entangled.

The hard part for her came when we returned home. I was eager to get back to the safe place of sanctuary and normality, but she dreaded it. She suggested that we go to a restaurant before returning to the house. She was buying time. When we got home she loaded the family dog into her car and drove around town for a while because it hurt too much to be in a house where she couldn't find Karl.

After she posted some of her feelings on Facebook, she received many responses from other mothers who have a child in college. One mother told her that she slept on the sofa while her son was a freshman but would return to her bed when he was home for a visit. Another said it was important to leave the light on in her son's bedroom.

As a fumbling husband I asked my wife, "How can I help you through this?" She quickly responded, "Please don't try to rescue me from this hole." It's where she needs to be. It is what she signed up for on the day she first cradled Karl in her arms.

She always knew this day was coming, but the knowledge waited in a dark corner of her heart, distracted by the light of birthday candles, bedtime stories, Little League games, piano recitals, cross country meets, high school prom, and teary conversations when he made a bad choice along the way. And there were all of

those delicious ordinary dinners, where Karl would take his turn saying the blessing over the meal she made. She filled each of these moments with as much love as she had in her heart. Now that she's seen the fruit of her labors, how can she not be in a hole?

We all live with a variety of callings in our lives. All of them—including a mother's calling to prepare her child to leave her—are costly.