

What Sound Does an Empty Nest Make?

by Mike Mulvey

When we moved six years ago, the buyers felt the house needed additional cleaning. Even though we didn't have to—our house easily met the “swept clean” criteria—I volunteered to go back and do it. I wanted to collect my thoughts, and this provided an opportunity.

After scrubbing the inside of the oven and wiping down the counters, I returned my cleaning supplies to the car. We spent the entire day moving, it was almost ten o'clock, and I was tired. Walking back to the house, the neighborhood seemed asleep. The silence inside struck me even more, as my footsteps made no noise. My wife and I spent twelve years in this house, raising four children and one “party animal” yellow lab.

Noise was constant, existing in so many forms. The organized kind, emanating from birthday parties and holiday gatherings, and the spontaneous kind like our dog barking for attention, someone suffering an injury and crying, or laughter from a funny joke. Now, seeing nothing but bare walls and hearing only my own breath, the finality hit me. Call them hallucinations, but visions of time's past appeared, uplifting my mood from the sad realization that this happy phase of our lives, encompassing the majority of our children's youth, had ended.

I saw them sitting and standing on the white bench in the breakfast nook, around the old, weathered wood table marred by marker marks and accidental dings. The four of them sitting behind placemats and plates, stabbing at pancakes amassed high on a large tray, squirting whipped cream, pouring syrup, and happily digging in as Spencer panted loudly in hopes of something hitting the floor.

As the vision melted into the white wainscoting that framed the breakfast nook, new noises echoed down the stairs from our second-floor bonus room. I walked to the base of the stairs, listening to paddles send a ping pong ball back and forth, punctuated by heckles, frustration, and an occasional paddle slam in between points. Audible footsteps followed from racing around as part of some game or chase. Then, laughter tumbled down the stairs: the unconditional, unbridled joyous sounds of safe children at play.

It was late and time to go, and there was only one way to properly leave.

“Good night, Connor,” I shouted out loud up the stairs towards his bedroom, my words generating a soft echo.

“Good night, Jack,” I whispered through the open door to Jack's room in the hallway as I slowly walked toward the garage.

“Good night, Molly, good night, Patrick,” I said while passing the open doors to their rooms, the pink and blue-colored walls staring back at me.

The closing of the door separating the laundry from the garage, usually a noise eclipsed by louder sounds like children leaving for school, rang in my ears as I stared through the empty space, free of so many bikes, toys, and holiday decorations. The whir of the descending garage door muffled my footsteps as I exited by stepping over the ankle-high sensor while ducking under the door. Once outside, I turned back, listening to the “thud” of the door hitting the concrete as the whirring motor stopped. Chirping and ribbiting from the preserve across the street replaced the mechanical noises from the garage until my starting engine drowned them out. I surfed the radio channels, looking for a song to satisfy my mood. I couldn't find one, and instead rode to our new home in silence, trying to balance the sadness of leaving one place with the excitement of moving to another.

I think about the final 45 minutes or so I spent in that house from time to time. I'm so glad I had a moment to say goodbye to a place that brought me so much joy. As our children age ever closer to graduating high school and college, my wife and I wonder what will follow.

What sound does an empty nest make? For me, that question was answered that evening, and the sounds of my young children's laughter will forever echo in my head. ✨

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