

Revised and updated

GIVE THEM WINGS



*preparing for the time
your teen leaves home*

FOREWORD BY ALEXANDRA KUYKENDALL

CAROL KUYKENDALL
with krista gilbert

As I find myself navigating this new season of life with my oldest child finishing high school, I am deeply grateful that Carol and Krista have updated this must-read book. They have done an outstanding job addressing the issues that everyone in the family will go through before, during, and after this inevitable, scary, beautiful, awesome transition. Be prepared for both smiles and tears as you read! This book is what every parent needs to help our teenagers soar out of the nest and into the next season of life with confidence.

SHAUNTI FELDHAHN

Social researcher and best-selling author of *For Women Only* and *For Parents Only*

What a beautiful and helpful book! *Give Them Wings* offers practical ideas to prepare your adolescents for their eventual launch from your home. Carol and Krista are honest, vulnerable, and wise mentors who help us to live intentionally as we navigate the high-school and college years. *Give Them Wings* will help you face this transitional time with empathy and courage, and encourage you to surrender your children to the One who loves them best. Carol captures so tenderly those heart-wrenching moments of grief that accompany our kids' leaving home. By following the wisdom in this book, you can face that moment knowing you have set them up for this transition, and have paved the way for fulfilling relationships with your adult children.

LISA THOMAS AND
GARY THOMAS

Author of *Sacred Marriage* and *Sacred Parenting*

I just sent this text to my husband: “Parenting is hard.” Wasn’t it just yesterday I was reading Carol Kuykendall’s book *Five-Star Families* and getting insight for the golden years of child-rearing? Now I’m closing in on sending my oldest son to college, and I can feel the rules of our relationship changing. *Give Them Wings* is a gift to me in this season. I know I’m supposed to pivot somehow, but I’m just not sure what that should look like. This book continues the mentoring relationship Carol has established with so many moms over the years and casts a beautiful vision for how we might help our kids leave home.

SARA GROVES

Singer/songwriter

Inspired, warm, personal, insightful, and instructive are just a few of the words I would use to describe this wonderful book. The young adult years can be so mysterious. But this book will guide you through your journey with your teens as though the authors are walking with you as personal friends. They’ll help you find strength and wisdom to launch your children well. You will love *Give Them Wings*.

SALLY CLARKSON

Author of *The Lifegiving Home* and *The Lifegiving Parent*, blogger, podcaster, and ministry leader

I’ve known Carol Kuykendall since just after she wrote *Give Them Wings* the first time around. We’ve written

books together, led at MOPS International together, and done life together, and I can honestly say that I don't know anyone better to write on the topics of raising and releasing children. *Give Them Wings* was a classic go-to book when it was first released. It's even better in this updated and revised version. Sit down and open up a conversation with one of the wisest mothering mentors I've ever known.

ELISA MORGAN

Speaker; author, *The Beauty of Broken* and *The Prayer Coin*;
cohost, *Discover the Word*; president emerita, MOPS International

Since motherhood is a sisterhood, I need—and crave!—the guidance of wise big sisters. And that's why I'm grateful for this treasure from Carol Kuykendall and Krista Gilbert, two experienced and highly credible moms who have walked before me and navigated the teenage years with the grace, humility, and godly mind-set I aspire to. Packed with encouragement, *Give Them Wings* is an uplifting resource that can help moms launch great kids and build relationships that last. Most importantly, the authors write from a foundation of faith, reminding us that good parenting is ultimately about surrender to God and glorifying Him in every season. Do yourself a favor and get this book!

KARI KAMPAKIS

Mom of four girls and author of *Liked* and *10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know*

When I welcomed my first child into my arms, I had no idea how hard it would be to one day let him go. My heart only had room for dreams and plans, the kind of imaginings that were filled with memory-making and mama-loving. But then he grew up. And my once full house started to feel quite empty. I've now made it through three high-school graduations, with three yet to go. This time, however, I'll have Carol Kuykendall's *Give Them Wings* handy to help this mama's heart—and her children—soar through this next season.

MICHELE CUSHATT

Author of *Undone: A Story of Making Peace with an Unexpected Life*

As parents of six children (five are teens), this book is like music to our ears and salve for our souls. It's a must-read for any parent entering this unfamiliar season of changing roles. Carol does a phenomenal job helping us keep this tender and sometimes painful season in perspective, and she continually reminds us that during each step, we can rely on our sovereign and all-sufficient God.

BARBARA GELINAS AND
ROBERT GELINAS

Pastor, Colorado Community Church, Aurora, Colorado

With gratitude from a tenderhearted mama currently in this life season, I say to Carol Kuykendall and Krista Gilbert: Thank you, and this book is right on time. *Give Them Wings* is a lifesaver in maneuvering the launch of our

kids out into this world—a go-to resource for every parent who longs to let go with grace but wasn't given a manual at birth on how to do it.

LISA WHITTLE

Author of *Put Your Warrior Boots On* and *5-Word Prayers*, speaker, and podcast host of *5 Word Prayers Daily*

Give Them Wings offers practical ways parents can equip their kids and launch them from the nest well, capitalizing on the days they still have together. I'm personally grateful to Carol and Krista for this excellent resource, and will refer back to it often as I prepare my own kids to fly.

JESSIE MINASSIAN

Author of *Family: How to Love Yours (and Help Them Like You Back)*

Though *Give Them Wings* is written with mothers in mind, it's also valuable for fathers who have to face the reality of releasing their grown children into the world. The book informs both the mind and the heart of those preparing for this critical developmental milestone in the normal progress of the family life cycle. The chapter on marriage readjustments provides valuable strategies for navigating the potentially turbulent waters of the empty-nest season. *Give Them Wings* normalizes the stress of this chapter of life and provides hope for those approaching or engaged in this God-given process.

DOUGLAS M. JONES

Director of Marriage and Family Therapy Center, Whitworth College

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Foreword

Preparing Our Kids to Fly

by Alexandra Kuykendall

MOMS OF TEENAGERS, welcome to the book that was written for you. If you have a child on the brink or in the process of moving out of your home, and you're not quite sure how to handle all of the feelings around this letting-go process, I have two things for you.

First, you are not alone: Mothers have been wiping their tears since the beginning of time as their children have flown the nest. Second, I'm confident you've come to a trusted source for help. Moms have been coming to this book for decades to receive encouragement, spiritual direction, and practical guidance in giving their kids wings. This updated version is the best of both worlds: It contains timeless truth for our mothering hearts that are dreading the letting-go process, while addressing issues that are distinct to today's generation of teenagers and how we parent them.

I write this on the edge of a cliff. These days I need only a few fingers to count down the years until my eldest leaves home. I've pioneered all of my parenting firsts with her: the

first preschool, kindergarten, middle-school, and, as of a few weeks ago, high-school experiences. With her, I will journey through my first sending off into the world. And this truly feels as though I'm standing at the edge of a huge hole that I know nothing about.

I'm desperate for some guidance as my heart aches at the thought of this monumental change in our relationship. The thought of her leaving puts me into a panic. I break into a sweat and my stomach turns. And yet, I know it is part of her journey and mine. Much as I resist it, we raise kids to impact the world, not just our hearts, and we must release them into that world to live out God's purposes for them. We're doing our children a service when we let them go; when we do, they can have their own adventures with God and we can increase our own faith as we trust God in new ways to care for them.

We are a unique generation of parents. Generation X, those of us in the stage of graduating our children, has been shaped by our own childhoods. Known by demographers as the "Neglected Generation" due to the prevalence of divorce and latchkey kids, we've responded by raising our own children with an oversize sense of security. We've managed to perfect helicopter parenting, we have amazing technology that allows us to monitor and stay in touch with our children regardless of their age or location, and we live in a culture of fear that reminds us with every news headline that we should be afraid. It's not exactly a formula for parents to give their babies their wings. When we combine these

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generational nuances with our hearts' natural resistance to letting go, we can see how much our generation of parents needs this book.

The author has a special place in my life. As the junior Mrs. Kuykendall, I've had the joy of being married to her eldest, Derek. My husband and his two sisters, the three people Carol raised, are at the top of my favorites list. During their young adult years, I've watched as she's reminded them of who God says they are and then has prayed them through their own adventures. She has also been my encourager as I've parented my four girls (and an encourager to hundreds of thousands of other moms through her writing and work at MOPS International). She knows what she's talking about when she offers understanding and direction on letting go. In this updated edition she has brought in the voice of my dear friend Krista Gilbert, who has been one step ahead of me in mothering. I've stood with Krista during the last year as she has journeyed through high-school graduation and college drop-off for the first time as a mom. She is the perfect complement to Carol's trusted voice.

Are you ready, Mom, to join me in facing these fears and the grief that comes with admitting our children are indeed growing to the point of moving out of our homes into places and spaces we will never know? Are we ready to let God go before them, trusting He will also remain behind with us? I'm not sure we have a choice; the time has come. We may not have a choice about our feelings either—they will wash over us in inconvenient and surprising ways. We do,

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however, have a choice about how we respond to our feelings and our fears. May we be mothers of courage in this process, giving our kids wings so we can watch them fly.

Introduction

Crying in the Kitchen

I STOOD IN THE KITCHEN ONE SUMMER MORNING just weeks before we were to take Derek, our oldest child, halfway across the country to start college. He was sitting there at his every-morning spot at the counter, looking at his phone and eating cereal. Suddenly, I teared up. I simply could not stand the thought that soon he would no longer sit at our kitchen counter in the mornings. So I just kept watching him. And crying. And wondering if I could possibly survive the pain of it all. Finally, I walked over and hugged him. “I’m sorry, Bro,” I mumbled. “Sometimes I just have to do that.” He kind of nodded. I think that meant he understood.

What was happening to me? What kind of crazy mother cries as she watches her kid eat cereal? A mother who dreads the fact that her child is leaving home; a mother who realizes these are the last days her family will all live together under the same roof. A mother who realizes his absence will change the shape of her family forever.

That reality takes my breath away, as if I'm living without oxygen for a moment.

That's what this book is about. It is the story of my family—your family—as we navigate this journey through a major life transition . . . the time when teenagers are growing up and leaving home. It's a painful season filled with contradicting emotions: They're trying to become people who don't need us. We're trying to become parents who accept and encourage that independence. But we find ourselves holding on to every moment because we don't want to let go.

We face some tough emotional challenges in this journey. If family has been a priority, the closeness we've created becomes the stumbling block we have to climb over in that journey.

Parenting becomes confusing. As if someone suddenly changed the rules and we don't exactly know who's in charge or how not to be in charge. Our teenagers also change; there are more dramas and fewer family times all together, and even when those family times happen, not everyone is excited about them.

I first wrote this book years ago, when our three children were entering high school and looking toward leaving home. I was blindsided by what this new stage of life revealed in me. I poured out my heart responses on these pages, which were almost like a memoir about my resistance to the changing shape of our family and what I learned along the way. I needed hope about life beyond this season, so I watched other families with adult children and realized that I wanted

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us to emerge from these transitions as a family of people who gathered around a Thanksgiving table or at a Fourth of July celebration not out of obligation, but because we liked each other. I wanted to be friends with Derek, Lindsay, and Kendall when they became our adult children.

Fast-forward to today. Those children are now adults who are married and raising their own families, and I have an even better view of the importance of the “letting go” season in the life of a family. Some things never change, like a mother’s heart responses to her children leaving home. Some things greatly change, like the cultural challenges new to every season.

So I’ve revised this book to make it more relevant, while also clarifying the messages I keep learning again and again, such as

- > The ultimate relationship we desire with our children—on the other side of this transition—is an adult-to-adult friendship that grows from the way we navigate and encourage their confident independence in their last years at home.
- > The home-stretch season of parenting during their high-school years matters greatly. It is a time to be intentional and make the most of the days we have with them so they are prepared to go and we are prepared to let them go.
- > This is a personally transformative season not only for our teenagers but also for us as parents, which gives us

an opportunity to strengthen our marriages if married, our peer relationships, and our faith and trust in God's promises.

Finally, the journey through the “letting go” season has taught me that whatever I fiercely hold on to—my family, my children—I need to surrender to God in trust. The place of surrender is an uphill journey to a mountaintop called Moriah where God meets us, just as He met Abraham, who surrendered his beloved son Isaac there. God gives us the same promise that He gave Abraham: When we reach that place of total surrender, He provides. He provides for our children's needs and ours—in all circumstances. And He blesses us (Genesis 22:13-18). In our shared independence, we are freed to reach a greater dependence upon Him.

That is my heart message in this updated book. As I reread and rewrote some of the sections, I was surprised how the descriptions of certain moments triggered the same emotional responses I felt when I lived them, evidence that those life-shaping memories live deep in a mother's soul, where they become part of who we are—part of our stories.

My friend Krista Gilbert has some fresh stories about “letting go,” having launched her oldest and only daughter to college, with three sons to soon follow. I welcome her voice as she shares her family stories in some chapters and answers questions in the “Conversations with Krista” section near the end of each chapter. She also wrote chapter 12 (“Marriage Re-adjustments”).

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Another new section in this updated book is called “Think about It . . . Talk about It.” These questions ending each chapter are meant for your reflection or to guide a group conversation. As always, we more effectively apply what we are reading as we reflect on what we’re learning and share our responses with others. I am so grateful for Krista’s contributions from the challenges of her family’s journey. Read on as she shares about one of her “letting go” experiences.

KRISTA: APPLE DAY

A friend once asked about a time when I truly felt happy, when I sensed that all seemed right in the world. The answer came to me immediately. Every single time I’ve felt this way, I’ve been surrounded by my people, the ones I get to call my tribe: my husband, Erik; my children, Kenna, Dawson, Hudson, and Stetson; and my extended family. The richest, fullest parts of living spring from roots of deep love, from God and from my people. My daughter calls us “the Big Fat Greek Wedding family.” Like the characters in that movie, we like to be really involved in one another’s lives. Someday our children may appreciate it.

Because of this passion and commitment, launching our daughter from our home was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. I didn’t want my family to change—I liked it the way it was. But my family’s dynamics were changing whether I liked it or not. I realized this on one of my favorite days of the year: Apple Day, a longtime fall tradition in our family! All together we’d trounce to the neighboring apple orchards, pick fresh, crisp Jonagolds from the trees (the only kind for the best homemade

applesauce), and come home to peel, chop, churn, and slice the fruit into pies, sauce, crisps, and butters.

Apple Day morning, I ran up the stairs to the kids' bedrooms singing, "It's Apple Day!" Groans interrupted my joyful song. Then, as if that didn't communicate enough, one of my boys shouted, "We don't even like Apple Day anymore, Mom!" They rolled over, clearly more excited about getting two more hours of sleep than hearing my news. Crushed, I walked down the stairs and sulked on the front step. So that was it? Apple Day was over? What if I still wanted to do Apple Day? Didn't I get a say in all of this?

I had a choice. I could force them to put on their shoes and get moving, or I could recognize that what was once an important, memory-making tradition was no longer serving that purpose. While I still enjoyed the ritual, it was drudgery to them. After a solid hour of pouting, I decided to let go of Apple Day as a family affair . . . for now.

Traditions are sometimes meant only for a season. That doesn't mean I need to let go of it forever. Who knows, maybe a couple of years into college they'll come back and ask to do Apple Day again. Maybe just for old times' sake, realizing that it really was fun. Or maybe just because they know it means something to me.

CHAPTER I

A FAMILY IN FLUX

I'VE ALWAYS LIKED THE CHALLENGE of creating our family Christmas card. I'd reminisce as I sorted through a file of pictures from the previous year, looking for just the right ones. But I hit a year when I didn't have many pictures, and my sudden sadness surprised me. It was about more than creating a Christmas card.

Our kids were leaving home, which meant we had fewer photo opportunities. I had to choose from some summer ones, or I had nothing. Kendall, our youngest, was still in high school, but Derek and Lindsay had already gone back to college and wouldn't be home again until Christmas.

There were several from a family hike in July, but they were too dark because that outing turned into a night hike when 20-year-old Derek vowed we could make it to the top of Green Mountain, even though we started at 6:00 p.m.

"No problem!" he'd insisted when I questioned whether

we could get all the way up and back down before dark. “No problem” because he’d turned into a fitness guru since going off to college. And I was trying not to be Debbie Downer, casting doubt on every suggestion made by our almost-adult children. Besides, I was up for almost any all-family activity during the short time everyone was home together. So I silenced any further doubts.

Yet, as we nervously picked our way down the last part of the rocky trail in near darkness, I had to work hard at holding my tongue.

Then there were a few pictures from a memorable backpacking trip. When our kids were tweens and many things were deemed “boring,” they rolled their eyes at the absurd notion of strapping sleeping bags on their backs and trekking to some remote mountain spot to sleep on the ground. But when our two older ones went off to college, they were miraculously transformed. Backpacking was in! The tougher, the better. Call it role reversal, but by then I’d become the reluctant one. My maturity and experience taught me something about the reality of camping: It always sounds like more fun than it really is. I was getting dangerously close to outgrowing camping—just when they were growing into it.

None of the pictures from that outing would work, I decided, because we all looked as if we’d been in the backwoods way too long, with wild hair and dirty clothes. I looked the worst. And as long as I chose the Christmas card pictures, I wasn’t about to choose one where I looked the worst.

As I reviewed the rejects, I thought about our changing

family and wondered if we were reaching the end of a tradition I'd taken for granted: creating Christmas cards with the whole family in the pictures. When do families stop doing that? The question made me feel an increasingly familiar kind of sadness.

We were a family in flux—a family of adults and “almost adults”—instead of one with parents and children. Our all-together family gatherings were fewer and farther between, often marked by mostly friendly differences of opinions that boiled down to this: We were living in an unfamiliar season of changing roles, and sometimes we didn't exactly know our way.

I dreaded the thought of entering this season. At first, I felt angry about the seeming unfairness of it all. When Derek left home first, I asked God, “Why did You give us the gift of family—a circle of close relationships where we learn to love and depend on each other—and then, one by one, take each one away?”

Now I know that God does not take family away. He merely changes its shape.

And in the changing, we have a choice: We can resist, clinging to the past and fixating on our losses, or face the new season with hopeful expectations. I bounced between both responses but wanted to land on the latter. As I look back over our family's journey, I see some things I learned along the way.

God does not take family away. He merely changes its shape.

Anticipation is worse than reality. Isn't this true of most of life's anxieties? The hours I spend dreading my dentist

appointment are much worse than my 45 minutes in the chair. When our children were young and desperately in need of constant love and protection, I dreaded the thought of their leaving home one day. “They won’t be ready, and I won’t be ready,” I vowed passionately and rationally.

That’s exactly what my friend Sue told me when I ran into her.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Not good,” she admitted in a shaky voice. “It’s Matthew, our baby. He went off to kindergarten this week, and I feel so sad. I know this sounds silly, but I feel like I’m going to blink, and suddenly our kids will be grown and gone for good.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head apologetically. “See? I’m a mess!”

I smiled sympathetically because I remembered feeling the same way when a predictable, bittersweet milestone of independence, such as a child’s first step, first sleepover, or first day of school, dramatically magnified the reality of their growing up and going away. I especially remember the day my own “baby” skipped happily down the driveway to be swallowed up by that huge, yellow school bus that drove her off to kindergarten with a pack of squealing children I didn’t know. That bus symbolized *leaving home*, and as I walked back up our driveway alone, my life passed before me like a video on fast-forward. When the movie stopped, our three children were gone, leaving Lynn and me living alone in that place called the “empty nest.” I didn’t even know what the term meant until someone told me the analogy came from

the way eagles raise their young, described in the Bible: “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions” (Deuteronomy 32:11). When the eaglets are ready, the mother “stirs up its nest” by removing the outer lining of soft materials to reveal the sharper, prickly twigs. That encourages the eaglets to leave home, which is an act of love because what good is an eagle that never learns to fly? During the test flights, the eagles spread their wings and catch their eaglets when they fall. That’s how mother eagles give eaglets their “wings.”

When Lynn and I got married and had three children in five years, I couldn’t imagine an empty nest for three specific reasons called Derek, Lindsay, and Kendall. They totally changed my life, my passions, and my definition of myself. They became part of my very being. As a friend said, “Becoming a parent means your heart is never your own again.” Mother and writer Dale Hanson Bourke warned that “becoming a mother will leave her [a woman] with an emotional wound so raw that she will be forever vulnerable.”¹

After becoming a parent, I discovered I couldn’t go away overnight without feeling a bit incomplete. A siren in the distance always made me wonder where my children were. The rejections and hurt feelings they experienced wounded me deeper than my own hurt feelings. In an instant, I could measure their well-being by watching them walk toward the car after school, looking into their eyes, or listening to

their voices. I constantly needed to look at them for that kind of checkup, because *my* well-being usually depended on *their* well-being.

By the time our kids were in high school, that raw emotional wound made me dread the thought of them leaving home. Family had always been a high priority for us, and we functioned regularly as a unit—five people together. We filled all the chairs around our dinner table. We appeared together in the annual Christmas card pictures (whether they turned out well or not). We visited grandparents together. We celebrated family birthdays and Thanksgivings together. I couldn't imagine removing one person from the picture. It would throw the whole unit off balance.

I dreaded the inevitable changes, but experience has shown me that dread and worry are the paralyzing emotions one conjures up while standing in the present and fretting about the possibilities of the future.

I've learned that those fears ignore the sufficiency of God, who promises to provide for us when we reach our point of need, not years in advance when we're fretting over the possibilities. To dread the thought of a kindergartner going off to college is to totally jump over and ignore what God will do in the in-between time.

Corrie ten Boom, who survived the horrors of living in a Nazi concentration camp in World War II, was a child when her father helped her learn this lesson about the timeliness of God meeting our needs. She told her daddy that she was afraid of dying at some unknown time in the future.

He comforted her with a familiar analogy about riding to Amsterdam on the train.

“When do I give you your ticket?” he asked.

“Why, just before we get on the train.”

“Exactly. And our wise Father in heaven knows when we’re going to need things, too. Don’t run out ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need—just in time.”²

When the day comes for children to leave home, we’re given the strength to cope—just in time.

Transitions are tough. Still, most of us parents face a difficult but temporary period of adjustment. When we love passionately, we can hurt deeply. Good-byes are tough. Change is difficult. Losses cause pain. The exit of a child, especially a first or last child, forever alters the structure of a family and the definitions of individuals. The child’s physical absence leaves a gaping hole in our lives for a time and often catches us by surprise, as if we never saw it coming. Our grief is real and a necessary part of a family’s journey through transition.

Admittedly, some parents accept these leave-takings less emotionally than others. I knew I would have a hard time when I got all nostalgic as each of our kids went off to all-day-long school. I have friends who celebrated with brunch and mimosas. God made us different; we have different personalities.

According to the Enneagram, a personality typing system that helps us understand ourselves, I am a “Helper.”³ Mothering my children has fulfilled my desire to help others and given me great joy in meeting their needs. No wonder I’ve resisted the loss of that role. According to another personality indicator, I am described as a “feeling” person, which means I instinctively respond to life on an emotional level and experience losses deeply. I also resist change. I find security in the familiar—a reliable restaurant, pretty much the same hairstyle, the comfortably familiar arrangement of our living room furniture. Transitions are tough for me; I grieve greatly. But the feelings are temporary. I’ve learned this type of grief passes.

God has a family plan. Our Creator, who divided the year into seasons and the days into mornings and nights, also divided people into families. When He created Adam and Eve and united them in Genesis 2:24, saying “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh,” He created this gift of family structure, which offers children the stability and loving security they need in the midst of an unstable and insecure world. He intended families to be a safe haven where children, like tender shoots, are nurtured until their roots grow strong and deep. He intended for those children to then be released from dependency to venture forth in marriage (if they choose marriage), yet remain in healthy, meaningful relationships honoring their fathers and mothers (Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:4).

The purpose and time frame of this nurturing process

may be lived out differently in different cultures. In biblical times, girls married at an early age. Mary was said to be about 13 when she was betrothed to Joseph. Young married couples often lived with their families. In our Western culture we raise our children to leave us, to become independent as they are able, usually soon after high school.

Yet as our country experiences more diversity, we see that first- or second-generation immigrants often have different expectations. Children may not leave home, and three generations might expect to live together under the same roof. For financial reasons, young adults may stay home or return home while attending college or working. Others may not be capable of leaving home because of physical or mental disabilities. In 2016, according to Pew Research, 15 percent of young adults ages 25 to 35 were living with their parents, versus 10 percent in 2000.⁴

We must see the bigger picture. Sometimes we are so immersed in the child-rearing season that we fail to see the bigger picture of changing seasons. When our teens were close to leaving home, I saw a visual that helped me put the seasons in perspective. Imagine life as a whole pie, with different wedges representing different seasons. The child-rearing wedge, though intense and consuming, accounts for only one small fraction of that whole pie. When we're immersed in that wedge, we have little energy or vision to imagine life beyond that moment. But God willing, we're likely to spend more than twice as many years in relationship with our adult children in other seasons as we spend

actively parenting them in the child-rearing season. That's motivation to let go of the parent-child modes and intentionally move toward a mutually satisfying, more independent adult-to-adult relationship.

Another perspective comes from calculating how old we will be when our last child leaves home, and then add the number of years we hope to live beyond that. Let's say you are 50 years old and married when your youngest leaves home. Given your life expectancy, you and your spouse may spend 30 years together in an empty nest. For Lynn and me, that's more than five times as many years as we spent together before they were born. That awareness helped us recognize the importance of our marriage, even in the midst of raising and launching children. A growing and healthy marriage requires nurturing, just as growing and healthy children do.

I'm also learning how our parenting perspectives change as our seasons change. Raising infants and toddlers is so full time that we can't wait until they get older and things get better. But as we enter the next season and experience its challenges, we realize that parenting doesn't get better as much as it gets different. The early years are more physically exhausting. The season of launching is more emotionally exhausting. Yet God, in His infinite mercy, blesses us with the ability to forget some of the hardest parts and remember mostly the good.

Now that I'm past the launching season, I can offer this perspective: For me, the very best season of parenting is the

one I'm in right now—being friends with our adult children. Yet I had to navigate through many painful “letting go” experiences to move from the launching phase to this season of lifelong friendship, and I had to give my children plenty of encouragement and freedom along the way so they felt confident of their independence.

Conversations with Krista

What surprised you most about launching a child from your home?

The grief. I knew I would be sad, but the deep sense of profound loss surprised me. My daughter is the first one to leave, and her departure changes the shape of our family forever, as Carol observed. There isn't a way to prepare for that, and we can't predict how we'll react. My sister, who tends to be less emotional than me, was surprised by how deeply she was affected by her oldest's graduation. This transition can feel like a metaphorical death of what once was, and most of us need to go through a grieving process. To push those feelings down or pretend the loss doesn't hurt only stunts the healing.

I learned to engage in healthy grieving practices, such as acknowledging my feelings; allowing time to be sad; and engaging in deep breathing, prayer, journaling, and healthy activities (creative pursuits, exercise, hiking in nature, etc.). I realized this was a pivotal moment in the life of our family, and I moved through the grief by giving myself time to process it.

Is it true that anticipation is worse than reality?

Definitely. If there's anything I've learned on my journey of walking with God over many years, it's that He offers grace to meet the need. We often cannot imagine going through something because we have not yet been given the grace for that situation. What I have come to know as truth, over and over again, is that God has my back. He isn't going to leave me without hope. This is the truth I hold on to when it comes to my changing family as well. When the time came to start letting go, grace loosened my grip. When my daughter walked down that aisle in the high-school auditorium in her graduation robe, grace comforted my aching heart and allowed me to celebrate. When she left for the summer to work at a camp that same year, grace allowed me to say good-bye. While these transitions are painful, God provides for our personal and real needs. I can trust that grace will go with me, need by need.

Think about It . . . Talk about It

- > Identify some emotional moments when you realized your child (or children) were growing up and away from you. How did you process your emotions?
- > What is your personal response to these statements from this chapter? Give personal examples.
 1. We're living in a season where we don't always know exactly who's in charge.
 2. Anticipation is worse than reality.

3. We all have different personalities; some parents accept these leave-takings less emotionally than others.
- > How old will you be when your last child leaves home? How many years do you hope to live beyond that age? What do you look forward to in that season?