



Getting lost and being found

For most of us, the transfer of independence to our children is a slow and steady one that reflects the level of responsibility they are ready for.

For parents of non-typical children, the same thing takes place. Depending on the challenge, it may take longer or may never totally happen at all.

When something tragic takes place, such as the loss of a partner, a natural response may be to protect your children by taking away their independence. Thinking anyone could die at any time, I acted that way when my husband died suddenly 2 1/2 years ago. Our adult children reacted in the same manner.

We did everything together; we couldn't be apart as we drew strength and security from each other. We even went to a doctor's appointment as a group, and all six of us went into the small office together. We were dependent on being together.

As time went on, we started to let go. Slowly, the children were able to be in their own beds without me. Although I wasn't able to face society yet, I could take going to the grocery store - albeit in another neighbourhood - so I didn't have to speak to anyone and accept their well-intentioned condolences.

I began to also realize that I could leave the children to some extent to carry on their daily tasks and they would return home in one piece. We started to get into our "new normal" of living without their father, my soulmate. I started to accept what life had handed us and began the long process of grieving, which I now realize never really ends, it just changes.

Part of that process with our daughter, who has a developmental challenge, was to get back to testing her capabilities and letting her grow into her own independence.

She will be 24 this year, and although she is smart, independent and has an active life, she did develop differently than her siblings. She takes the bus to college every day, walks to work, takes our dogs for walks, does laundry, unloads the groceries and puts them away, listens to music and knows the lyrics, remembers her routines for rhythmic gymnastics and reminds me when she has ortho appointments. She reminds me daily: whose challenge is it anyway?

As the months have passed, I have been able to feel comfortable in allowing her to grow and become the amazing young woman she is. I depend on her to catch the correct bus, remember her bus pass, her cellphone and to text me when she gets to her destination.

A few weeks ago, we had a new adventure as I took on a new client which had me change my schedule on Wednesday mornings. I had to be at the client's for 10 a.m., so I moved my gym time to 6 a.m. which meant Emma could still go to her zumba class from 9 to 10; I just couldn't pick her up and take her to an appointment she had one kilometre down the road.

I drove her to H20 and showed her the path she would take to her appointment, questioned her as we went through it again, asked if she had her cellphone and what time she needed to leave the gym to get her shake and reminded her that she had 45 minutes to do it. She felt really charged when I left her at zumba, and I smiled to myself that she was so grown up.

At 10:30, I called to make sure she was almost at her next stop. As she was walking, she was a bit out of breath but said she was almost there and that she would text me when she arrived.

At 10:55, I hadn't heard back, so I texted and asked if she had ar-

rived safely, and Emma answered that she thought she had taken the wrong street. Did she know which street she was on? She answered no, and then her phone battery died. You can imagine my panic, which overtook the worry she would be late for her appointment and the fact that I had to excuse myself from the meeting with the new client.

I tried to imagine which street she could have taken. Having her able to text and phone on her cell has been a blessing; not being able to contact her when she needed me was frustrating and worrisome.

I started the search realizing that I felt very alone in my journey and, for the millionth time, wishing I had her father to lean on. I thought of all the bad things that could happen, as she is very trusting of people. I tried to convince myself that most people are good, although it kept being clouded with the thought there are bad people everywhere as well.

I wondered what her father would do, what advice would he give in finding her, and came up with: be methodical.

As I tried to remain calm, I thought logically and retraced the route I had shown her. I went down every street she could have followed, and along some that were alleyways and adult communities.

It seemed a very long time, although it was only 15 minutes, but finally I found her walking down the wrong street, within a few minutes of the correct one.

The relief we both felt was evident as we held each other and cried.

I asked why she took that street, and she said, "I am sorry Mum, I made a mistake."

After we settled down, I asked Emma if she still wanted to go to her appointment. She said she did. She was having a manicure and pedicure and was really looking forward to it, so I hugged her and dropped her off, asked her if she could apologize for being late and explain what had happened to the esthetician. Just as I had dropped her off that morning, she happily left the safety of my car, and off she went to have her treatment done.

As I drove back to my meeting and reflected on what had happened, I realized that she had indeed "just made a mistake." I also realized that as much as I have worked on getting "better," I still am very aware of what it feels like to lose someone you love.

Thinking of how I could have prepared her better for her morning's journey, I realized that I did what any parent would do in preparing her for success, and that sometimes people just make mistakes. I know I do almost daily, so why can't that be her reason for taking the wrong turn?

I realized that life is an ongoing journey of learning, making mistakes, recovering and hopefully not making the same mistake. That we learn from making errors and that making them makes us human. It doesn't matter that we do make mistakes; it is how we get through them. I also reflected on the fact that although her father is no longer with us, he is watching over us every day. He is protecting Emma Charlotte "his little starlet," as he called her, and as her guardian angel, he is helping her become the strong young woman she is today.

Maybe we are all lost, on a journey and waiting to be found.

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Whose Challenge Is It Anyway?