



Time at last ... Zofia Karol and Adrian Burks Photograph by Martin Argles for the Guardian

'It's brought us closer together'

What happens when the children finally leave home? **Angela James** talks to some empty-nesters

Teresa Goodman

When my son Nathan was younger, I often used to think: if only I had time! If only I had time to clear out the cupboards, to tidy the place up, to get things straight. Everything seemed such a struggle. I was working, he was going to school, life was always so busy.

Then he went to university, and around the same time I was made redundant. So suddenly I had lots and lots of time, and I started to clear things out ... and I found myself looking at photographs of my little boy, and his school reports and certificates and things, and wondering: where did he go? Where did all those years go? When I opened some of the reports, I realised I hadn't really ever read them before, I'd been too busy to look at them properly. And that made me quite heartbroken.

It seems strange to liken it to a bereavement, but that's how it feels. A mini-bereavement, I suppose; but an enormous loss, and what I'm mourning is my child, and the life we used to have together. We live in a small house, but it seems so empty now, and when I'm out at the supermarket I find myself going down the pasta aisle and reaching for the fusilli, which was always his favourite, before thinking: I don't need that any more.

I'm sure things will get easier, it's still very raw at the moment and it's worse because I'm not working. I keep thinking I should get a job, find something to get me out of the house, and I'm sure I will do that soon, but this last year has been a tough one, and a strange one, and I've not quite got there yet.

Judy Ironside

It was only when my youngest child, Haia, left that I really felt the sense of the nest being empty; and while I wouldn't say I looked forward to it, I was definitely ready for it when it

came. I didn't have longings for those years to go on, or to be back there: my feeling was, I did a good enough job as a mother. I had the children, I raised them; they're out there in the world. I didn't need another go at it; instead, I had this sense of being freed up, of being liberated from those day-to-day needs that dominate your life as long as you have children living at home.

The big thing that I know has helped is that I'm doing a job I love - I'm the founder and director of the UK Jewish film festival - and that takes up a lot of my time and energy, and I enjoy every minute of it. It gives me an identity that is not just about being a mother, and that I'm sure has helped.

One thing that has surprised me is how much my husband, Leslie, and I enjoy meals on our own; Saturday morning breakfast, for example, when we sit around for ages with the newspaper. We hadn't realised how much we would enjoy chatting about our own topics; because the reality of raising five children is that a great deal of your conversation revolves around them. And it still does, but there's more chance to have a few other issues in there as well. The other thing I love having back in my life is spontaneity: it's so great being able to say, at 8.30pm, why don't we go out to see a film?

Adrian Burks and Zofia Karol

Adrian: The hardest thing, the thing I miss most of all, is quite simply their friendship. I miss their input, their stories; I miss sitting down to meals together with them.

I didn't realise, until it happened, what a major event it is when your children leave home; I'd known it would be big, but I didn't realise it would be so big. Their moving out coincided with a really serious illness,

and I almost died: so that forced me to rethink a lot of things, and to be more philosophical about change.

What you realise, when they have gone, is that so much of your life when they're children is about firefighting - you're thinking about what to make them for tea, you're thinking about what's happening at the weekend, you're wondering who's going to drive them later to where they need to be. You don't get much time to focus on your long-term goals, because life is a series of very pressing, short-term issues; but when they leave, suddenly all that changes.

You've got lots more time to spend with your partner; and if you are in a relationship that's not going well, and the children have been a distraction, then that can be a crunch time. But in our case, the children having left has brought us closer together.

Zofia: When our children were younger, our lives revolved around them - we both absolutely adored having children, and we really did enjoy all of it so there wasn't much to regret, in the sense that we weren't feeling we hadn't made the most of the time. But I also felt quite apprehensive about whether Adrian and I had enough to bond us again. I found myself wondering, do we like one another enough?

Having to think only about ourselves, after so long when we'd always be thinking about the children, was really strange for a long time. It felt as though we didn't have enough to do with our time, and that's despite the fact that I have a very busy job as a primary school head (and thank God for that, because it must be a lot easier to cope with an empty nest when you have the distraction of demanding work).

All parents live vicariously, to some extent, through their children; and what I find now is that, whereas before we were able to be involved in so much

of their lives, nowadays we can only clutch at them. But even that much is really wonderful; sometimes we get a text out of the blue, or they send us a picture, and you think - how brilliant!

Celia Dodd

When Paul, our oldest, left, I remember feeling this terrible grief: it was a physical grief, almost like walking around with a hangover. It seemed to me like the very opposite of childbirth: that had been about being given someone, my baby, whereas this was a wrench, my child being taken away from me. For days the grief was very, very raw; I cried a lot of the time for the first day or two after he left. And that helped a lot, because I needed to feel sad, I needed to grieve for what I was losing.

It didn't get any easier when Adam and then Alice went, either; I remember Alice leaving to go InterRail-ing, and that was really the start of Tom and I having the house to ourselves; and for several days after she'd gone I wandered around in a bit of daze, I felt so sad. It felt such a shock, to be suddenly disconnected from this person with whom you've been so involved, whom you've looked after for so long.

Each time one of them has left, I've tried hard not to cry at the moment of parting, but usually I don't manage it. The children have all been really sweet about it - they do understand, at some level, how hard it is for me. But the thing is that the experience



Celia Dodd, top, in her daughter's bedroom, and, above, Judy Ironside with daughter Haia

they're having is the complete opposite to the experience I'm having: for them, leaving home is all about excitement and adventure and something new, whereas for me it's all about being worried and anxious and feeling that my life isn't nearly so exciting or interesting now they're not around in it the whole time.

I suppose the truth is that I do have big regrets. When the children were young I worked a lot; and now I do feel that, if I could turn the clock back, I might have spent less time working and cherished that time more. But we all see the past through rose-tinted glasses: the reality was that I needed to work; and it was often tough looking after them, and you forget all that.

For me, as for many mothers whose children are leaving home, there are other factors in the mix that conspire to make it a difficult period: Adam leaving coincided with my mother's death, and I was also going through the menopause. Sometimes it's hard not to get pulled into this downward spiral, and to think it's all gloomy and downhill, that the best times are behind us.

But there are good things about this stage of life too. When the children are staying here, I get to spend one-to-one time with them. It feels like the right time to stand back from your life, rather than just blasting on through it as so many of us do, so much of the time. It's a watershed moment; a time to reflect on what's gone before, but also to think about what our lives will be from now on.

Celia Dodd's *The Empty Nest: How to Survive and Stay Close to Your Adult Child* is published by Piatkus, £12.99. To order a copy for £10.39, including UK p&p, go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6846