

Navigating
the Empty Nest
re-creating relationships

Robyn Vickers-Willis



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Contents

Preface	ix
Part 1 Debunking Myths around the Empty Nest	1
1 The empty nest	3
2 The parenting journey	13
3 We need to challenge our assumptions	23
Part 2 It's Another Transition	31
4 All at sea	33
5 Grieving—a vital part of any transition	43
6 Unfinished business	57
Part 3 Self-awareness Helps Parents Navigate	65
7 Adult development and the empty nest	67
8 Gathering up projections as we empty our nest	85
9 Re-creating relationships through lovingly letting go	97
Part 4 Young Adults Navigate a Different World	111
10 Young adult development	113
11 Families for changing times	125
12 Young adults talk about leaving the nest	133

Part 5	Navigational Tools for Parents and Young Adults	145
13	Daily practices for Self-awareness	147
14	Synchronicity is a guide to a new direction	157
15	Self-empowering skills for healthy relationships	171
Part 6	Parents Talk about the Empty Nest	185
16	Annette encourages us to have a romance with ourselves	187
17	Long-term married men talk	197
18	Julie and Marcus talk	207
19	Wendy encourages us to listen to our feelings and parent ourselves	215
20	The women's room	225
Part 7	Re-creating Our Nest	239
21	Re-creating with balance and baby steps	241
22	Re-creating through meaningful simplicity	253
23	Remaining open, aware and flexible	261
24	Remembering and celebrating	269
	Bibliography	279
	Index	283

Preface

Before I started writing this book I started writing two other books, one a historical novel and the other a psychological–sociological commentary on our society. These were the books I was keen to write at the time. But as so often happens in my life, some other force came in to suggest otherwise. This force seemed to think there was another book that was more important for me to write for life circumstances kept on drawing me back to the subject of the empty nest. First of all, I was asked to speak on national television because I had previously written books about midlife. The interesting thing is that unless I had recently experienced the empty nest and tried to make sense of my experiences by writing about them in my journal (some of which is contained in this book as jottings) I probably would have declined the offer. As it turned out, as I spoke from my own experiences and reflections, rather than as an ‘expert’, which is what the TV producers had asked me to be, I intuitively tapped in to some personal truths which I have since found are a reflection of others’ experiences and also supported by current research.

The second time I was drawn to the subject was when I was invited to New Zealand to run a series of workshops, one on the empty nest. This was the first time I had discussed my ideas openly with a group from which I could get feedback. I was both moved and empowered by the energy in the room as

those present talked about their experiences around the empty nest. This was six months after the television interview, and it was then that I seriously started writing this book.

Because the subject matter of the book encompasses my own experiences, I have discussed aspects of my life that include my children, their father and my siblings. It was impossible for me to write about my experience around emptying my nest without including them. They have been supportive of my writing in the past and I hope you as the reader feel I have honoured them, as this is always my intent. And of course I am so grateful for their interest and support of my writing. Some people have asked me why I use my own stories so much in my writing while others say that it is my personal stories that make my writing so easy to engage with. When I first started writing at the age of 47, after a lifetime of writer's block, I didn't one day sit down and decide I wanted to write books—they have chosen me. I believe an important part of my writing is to give you, the reader, examples of the type of inner work necessary for transformation. Most people have difficulty knowing and then reflecting on their inner state—whether it be at a physical, emotional or other level. Yet this is what we all need to learn to do if we are to transform ourselves and our lives as we navigate the many transitions in life.

As you read my stories and those of others, I encourage you to use them to develop your ability to acknowledge then reflect on what is happening for you in your inner world as your outer world changes, as you empty and then re-create your nest. Our society is so caught up in outer change that we can easily neglect the inner work that is so necessary for personal transformation. It is a transformation which from my experience has so many benefits—a lightness of being, pleasure in the

simple things, a loving connection with all around you, and a deep knowing that you are living the life you were meant to live.

If you are new to my writing, perhaps an analogy from my own life will be of assistance as you engage with my writing and my suggestions. One of my ambitions as I re-created my nest was to make my first vegetable garden. After I moved house, I discovered that one of the first friends I made near my new home is a wonderful gardener, something I had not realised in those early days of meeting. I believe that the teacher comes when the student is ready!

It took me a year after moving into my new home before I planted my garden. I know it is a long time to wait for something I so wanted to do, but I had to deal with a great deal of inner resistance before doing it. Amongst many other fears, I was scared of getting it wrong. Finally I talked to my friend about these fears. She explained how in the beginning she knew very little about gardening and she learnt much of what she knows now through trial and error as she planted her gardens over the years. She reassured me that she had also learnt from others and by reading articles and books about gardening.

Finally, with her encouragement, I planted my first garden on the day before my fifty-third birthday. I was amazed at how much fear I had to face as I planted the seeds and seedlings, but I persevered, knowing I would do the best I could, reassuring myself as I went that I was learning. I am still not a confident gardener, yet I benefit daily from eating my own delicious organic vegetables.

When I reflect on the gradual development of my gardening skills it reminds me that many of the processes I use to develop self-awareness and transformation have also evolved gradually. For example, when I first wanted to connect with my inner world, I found it incredibly difficult to pick up a pen and write

in my journal about my innermost thoughts and feelings. But I persisted. Now writing in my journal to connect with my inner world is something I enjoy doing. I can do it with ease. And it is an activity that supports me enormously as I transform my life.

I know I will never create gardens in the same way as my friend does. I will develop my own unique way of creating my garden. Similarly, while in this book I offer some of the processes that I and others have used to develop self-awareness, I am not suggesting that they will be the only right way; each of us will find our own unique processes. However, as with the help and encouragement my friend has given to me to start my own garden, I hope my stories and those of others will support and encourage you to create your own unique path of self-development and self-awareness as you re-create your nest.

At times I wanted somebody else to create my garden for me. I also knew that if I was going to honour an important part of me, I had to do it myself. Similarly, we can sometimes think it is up to somebody else to do the work to transform our lives, whether it is a partner, a child, a friend or a counsellor. This is not possible. Others can encourage us and at times even offer some useful advice as a teacher or as a person who reflects back an important aspect of ourself. But only we can do the personal work for our own development, while making use of appropriate guidance, both professional and otherwise.

As you read I encourage you to notice what else is happening around you in your life. When I first started gardening I'd notice that 'by chance' a comment by an acquaintance, or an article I would come across in a magazine supported and encouraged me in the development of my gardening skills. And it will be the same for you. Because as I know from my own experience, our teachers are all around us!

There are a number of people I wish to thank. My publisher Patty Brown, with her professional expertise, years of experience in publishing and natural warmth, has eased the way for me to navigate my next stage as a published writer. Once again, Karen Ward, my editor, has made her insightful suggestions to improve on my original manuscript. A big hug to my daughter, Patricia Hay, for her beautiful cover illustration and a special thank you to Melanie Blint for her brilliant graphic design skills. To the women and men who have generously shared their time and part of their life stories, thank you for your contribution towards *Navigating the Empty Nest*. My children, Patricia, Tom and Will have once again given me their constant love and support for my writing as well as contributing their collective skills of illustrating, web design and business development. For *Navigating the Empty Nest* they and their father, Peter Hay, have also generously allowed me to share some of 'our' stories. Several friends have welcomed me to share their homes on my regular visits to Melbourne. And to the many other friends and family who show an ongoing interest in my writing, a big thank you.

Robyn Vickers-Willis
www.navigatingmidlife.com

Part 1

Debunking Myths around the Empty Nest

The 'empty nest syndrome' has always been associated with mothers. But it is probably fair to say that fathers belonging to the current generation in middle life never had enough time with their children. They were too busy competing and scoring. By the time dad is ready to clear his calendar to make room for his children because he now needs them, they have usually left home (or are so intent on proving he is irrelevant, he may wish they would go!). It may seem as if the chance has passed, but it is never too late to make an effort to reconnect with a child. Not to do so can haunt a man for the rest of his life...

Gail Sheehy, *Passages for Men*

Chapter 1

The empty nest

Perhaps this is the most important thing for me to take back from beach living: simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid; each cycle of the wave is valid; each cycle of a relationship is valid.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea*

The impetus for this book started, or perhaps more accurately restarted, one Monday morning in April 2005, when at my new home a couple of hours out of Melbourne, my mobile rang. It was a producer from the Channel 7 *Sunrise* program asking me to appear on the show the next day to talk about the empty nest. I asked her if I could have fifteen minutes to think about it; I had broken my toe a few days earlier and my doctor had advised me not to drive long distances. Yet this was a subject that had fascinated me, in part because of my own recent experiences as I emptied my nest. The previous year I had started interviewing parents and writing a book on the subject, only to shelve it for another project. I rang my

daughter, Patricia, to discuss the offer and she said, ‘Mum, of course you should do it’. That helped me decide to go ahead, despite my broken toe. Such an opportunity to talk to a large audience about a subject of personal and professional relevance didn’t come every day.

As the *Sunrise* team would put me up in a city hotel that night I had a few details to arrange on the home front. I had my six-month-old Australian terrier, Molly, to be looked after. I rang my oldest son, Tom, but his phone was engaged and so I rang his partner, Pip, and she said they could look after Molly for me at their home in inner-city Melbourne.

As I packed I started to gather some thoughts on what I’d like to get across about navigating the empty nest. I jotted them down on a piece of paper and then I typed it up. The *Sunrise* team wanted me to offer five quick tips to viewers. This is what I finally typed out to take with me to Melbourne.

Five quick tips for navigating the empty nest

Every parent’s experience is different. It is important to recognise that men can feel the impact of the empty nest as much if not more than a woman at midlife. At midlife we often yearn to bring into our life what we haven’t given time to in the first half of life. A woman at midlife can feel swamped by relationships. As well as grieving the changes of the empty nest, she can also rejoice in the freedom from the daily grind of caring for the physical and emotional needs of children, which frees up time for her. In contrast, men have often neglected relationships in the first half of their life and, just as they want to make more time for their children, can feel the empty nest more strongly than the mother when young adult children decide to leave home.

As with any transition, accept that it is a paradox. For example, during the couple of years before emptying my nest I sometimes had an image of my three children as babies and wanted them still on my lap. At other times I felt enormous excitement at the thought of letting go of the daily ongoing physical and emotional responsibility of looking after children.

1. **FEEL** your feelings. As with any time of significant transition strong feelings will come up. It is important to create personal space—go for a walk or a drive if necessary—to experience these feelings. I’ve done a lot of crying, sometimes without knowing exactly what for. My youngest son turned 21 a couple of weeks ago, and with family photos I made him a book of his first 21 years. While doing this I inevitably tapped into some pretty raw feelings—and I know this all helps me to move on and create a new life beyond the ‘family nest’.
2. **CELEBRATE** all that you have created in your parenting. It is such a huge role and all of us parents need to recognise what an extraordinary thing we have done in raising our children. Recently my daughter turned 25 and we planned to celebrate together a couple of nights after her actual birthday. On her birthday I decided I wanted to celebrate my quarter of a century of mothering. So in the evening I opened a bottle of wine, got out a large sheet of paper and some crayons and wrote down all the feelings and thoughts that came to mind when I thought about all the ups and downs of my 25 years of parenting.

3. **NURTURE** yourself. I now feel as though it is time to give back to myself what I have given to my children. I'm also aware that like many women of my generation I missed out on quite a lot of mothering when young. So I feel as though I'm now catching up on a bit of the nurturing I missed out on from that time. And I'm aware that many men also missed out on this nurturing when young. My friends and I talk about 'being gentle with ourselves'. This might involve just sitting in the sun reading, preparing a favourite meal, spending a nurturing weekend with a friend or writing in a journal innermost feelings and thoughts.

4. **Face your FEAR.** If fear comes up, rather than getting busy so as to run away from it, I spend some time considering where it might be coming from. For example, a fear I noticed within me was around how my children would manage without me. Through counselling and self-reflection, I realised this was more to do with how difficult it was for me at times in my late teens as I left the family home after my mother died. I began to see that my children had more support than I had at this stage and that I had to separate out my own experiences on leaving the nest when young to what it was actually like for my children now.

5. **Think CREATIVELY.** Explore how you can bring into your life new ways of spending time with your children—times that work well for both of you. Also be creative about how you can start pursuing those interests you might have put on hold until now; perhaps you have already been doing some of this.

That night I dropped Molly off at Tom and Pip's and then had dinner with them at their local pub. Pip had already helped me choose what I was going to wear, so I was able to semi-relax knowing that the external details were in hand. I say semi-relax because I found that I had an internal interview going on in my head, trying to second-guess what they might ask me and checking that I could answer to my satisfaction. It had started as soon as I knew I was going on national television and now in the pub Pip noticed I was a little distracted. I found it somewhat of a relief to admit that although I could put on a fairly calm front, underneath I was very nervous.

The next morning I got up after little sleep. Perhaps it was because sleeping in a room on the forty-eighth floor of a city hotel was such a contrast to where I slept on an enclosed veranda in my newly renovated seaside home. In between noting the numbers on the digital clock move through the hours I thought of my bed at home, with the regular pulse of the waves and the gentle brushing of the palms that nestle against the veranda windows, the sight of the moon as it tracks across the sky, and the bird song which wakes me in the early morning.

All too soon I'm sitting in front of a camera. Behind the camera is a man but I can't see him and behind him it is black. A microphone is clipped to my top. In my left ear is an earpiece; it is my connection with the Sydney studio where the two presenters, David Koch and Melissa Doyle, and the other guest, Belinda Green, are sitting. If I just use visual cues it's as if I am speaking into a void. Luckily I become so involved in the discussion that I soon don't notice the strangeness of the situation.

Mel Many parents are counting the days until their children leave home but although it means less laundry and cooking it's not all positive. Lorna from Adelaide

has sent an SMS saying that when she hadn't rung her parents for a couple of days and then did and said, 'Hi Mum, it's Lorna here', her mum replied, 'Oh that's interesting. I have a daughter by that name but she never calls me anymore.' That's pointed, isn't it?

David It certainly is. A sudden empty nest can leave some mums and dads at a loss and a bit cranky. Belinda Green is here to talk to us about her experience when her two kids have flown the coop and author and psychologist, Robyn Vickers-Willis is here to talk to her about 'the empty nest', and to me as well, really. Now, Belinda, how does it feel to empty the nest?

Belinda We learn all about menopause, we learn about having babies but we never learn about how to cope with a situation like this. For me I used to always say, 'When the children leave home, when the children grow up, I'm going to do this and this and this'. But then suddenly they went and I said to them, 'You can't, I'm not ready', and they said, 'But we have and we are' and Sally said, 'Well now, Mum, who's the child here, you or me?' And so I was devastated. I still miss them desperately. I miss the cuddles and the smell of them and all those sorts of things and I wasn't prepared for it and I found it very, very hard. It's pathetic really.

Mel Is it just the company you miss and not having them around?

Belinda It's the reality that they're not my babies anymore. I still introduce Sally as my baby although of course

she is an adult. But it's just not having them around and they said, 'Mum you have to get yourself a life because you've got to stop living ours', which after all is pretty basic. And then I said, 'But you are my life'. And then I realised that when I looked at the big picture they are still part of my life. So they're reprogramming me. They're retraining me I think.

David My mother has this great saying: 'You've only got your kids on loan', which puts it into a bit of a perspective. Now Robyn, it's not just mums who are affected, is it?

Robyn No, it's not, David; fathers are affected too. I found when I did the research on navigating midlife that at midlife we often yearn for what we have neglected in the first half of our life and for many men it is around relationships, say in their forties that they want to have a more meaningful connection with their children. Therefore they can grieve as much as women can, if not more, at the thought of the empty nest as they are thinking they'd like to get closer to their children.

Mel So do parents need to find new things to do, something else to focus on? Is it as simple as that? Like travelling around Australia or some other project to put their energies into?

Robyn That's part of it and hopefully they've been doing some of that when they have had teenagers at home and thinking, 'What are my interests that I want to pursue?' But the other part of this that I believe has been very much neglected here and is the same for any time

of change in life, is our need to grieve what we are letting go of. We are not letting go of our children but we are letting go of that huge role we have as mothers and fathers as we parent our children when they are young. I've just been through it too, Belinda. I've just emptied my nest in the past eighteen months. But I actually did the emptying. I sold the family home. And I was really surprised at all the crying I did and I had to find space to do that. That has then helped me to let go of the relationship—no, not let go of the relationship, but as Belinda said I have thought of the three babies I had and really felt the grief of letting those three babies go but then knowing we are finding a new way of being together and connecting.

David They're not dead, after all, are they Belinda.

Belinda No, but you do grieve that loss—the thought of them not being there. You miss listening for the key to turn in the lock as they come home at night.

David So do you set any rules for you to get together—say, have a Sunday lunch together, or something else?

Belinda No, I'm not allowed to do that. But what's happening now is that we have a new respect for each other. We may have dinner together or do 'girly' things together. My other daughter is overseas and so it is a bit more difficult with her. So I send her care packages and that sort of thing, Aussie things. I think that in a way they value me more now and I'm just starting to realise that. I go around to their flats and clean and

stock their fridges with food. I still can't help myself. But I was grieving. I felt abandoned. I really felt abandoned and I was thinking, 'How could you do this to me after all these years and after all I've put in? How could you just turn your back on me so easily?' But that's not the way it really is. That's just the way I saw it at the time.

Mel David, you do the family rules thing, don't you? You have a Sunday when all your family catch up.

David Yes, the last Sunday of every month all my extended family, including my brothers and sisters, lunch together. There are about eighteen of us with all the family and boyfriends and girlfriends. We rotate it around.

Mel Robyn, what's some help then for parents?

Robyn I'd like to tap in to what Belinda said about abandonment. I had similar feelings to Belinda and I had to think, 'What's this about? My children aren't leaving me completely, they're not leaving my life.' Something I had to look at was that my mother died when I was seventeen and so when I left the nest when young it was a feeling of abandonment. I had to unpack my own experience at that time to then be able to relate in a more balanced way with what I was going through with my children. That then helped me to find more creative ways of being with them.

I now live a couple of hours' drive out of Melbourne. When I drive up to Melbourne and know I'm going to see them I love the fact that I'm not having to think, 'What's in the fridge for tea?' We go out for a meal

or visit Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens and just enjoy each other's company. I love that we are just enjoying each other's company.

Belinda Yes, it is different now. They are women now and I always think I saw them as my children, a sort of ownership, and they did say, 'Get a life' and so I've made some changes in my life and it's great now. It was almost a year of deep loss, though.

It was all over so quickly and there was so much more I would have liked to have said, given some of the points that were raised. Of course to have had the opportunity to speak on prime time television for even five minutes was a great opportunity.

I drove away from the studio worrying about how it had all gone. As I had been so intent on the words coming down that earpiece and hadn't seen anything on a screen I had no idea. Within minutes my mobile rang with feedback from my children. They reassured me I had done fine.

An hour later we were all sitting at an outside table at The Fitz in Brunswick having breakfast together. I relaxed into my chair and looked around me and thought how this seemed like the personal reward for what had been quite a tiring 24 hours. As we sat in the sun and talked about all that was happening in our lives I felt so blessed. I was glad I was re-creating my life in a way that meant we still had this sort of sharing. It seemed to me to be the reward for lots of hard work, not just the work of my hands-on role as their mother, but also the personal work I had put in over the past three years as I navigated the many rapids while re-creating my nest.

Navigating The Empty Nest is available for purchase online at

www.navigatingmidlife.com



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