



By Caryn Sullivan

TIME TO VISIT THE VOID

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All around me, parents fight the October blues that set in after their high school grad officially becomes a college freshman, leaving an empty spot in their hearts and their homes. Phone calls, e-mails, and visits help families make the transition so by the time the autumn leaves have stopped swirling and a new season is under way, most will have settled in to their new normal.

We've had a similar experience since our 16-year-old son with autism spectrum disorder left for boarding school last month. Unlike families who are coping with an expected college transition, we thought our son might never leave home. Yet, two weeks after we heard about a school for guys like him – bright, but socially challenged in traditional schools – he was living there. He now lives with a dorm parent and four other teens whose idiosyncrasies make friendships challenging but possible in an environment that focuses on their strengths, not their difficulties. This is the guy who has had a handful of sleepovers his entire life. This is the guy whose every need was my priority since we began our roller coaster ride on the autism spectrum 14 years ago.

Much like the caretaker of an ill or aging family member (or a new empty nester), there is a void where my life used to be – a void that appears when the need that consumes you no longer exists. Because he left so abruptly, I initially felt like our son went to treatment or boot camp, or, worse yet, that he died. I was gripped with grief. Slowly, my grief has evolved into reflection. I am becoming more comfortable with the eerie quiet that overtook the household when he left, a substitute for the stress that we were so accustomed to. I have a new appreciation for time. Time helps us to prepare, allows us to heal, and gives us perspective. I see clearly how autism has dominated our family life for as long as I can remember. I see how our challenged child's needs have remained constant, while our typically developing children's needs have evolved and matured, in tandem with the development of skills, independence and a desire to assert both. I see how my focus on his needs may have both facilitated and limited his development. I see how my focus on his needs made me less available to others who also needed me.

The reclusive school he attends intentionally limits students' contact with the outside world. So in our electronic age where e-mail, instant messaging and cell phones give us instantaneous connection, our boy with a communication disorder has no access to a computer or cell phone and minimal contact with home. Instead, he has pencil, paper, envelopes and stamps and a requirement that he use them weekly. The good news is I know that by week's end I'll find new treasure in our mailbox. The bad news is, it's impossible to maintain a dialogue with him by snail mail. For this is the guy with ADD who once responded to his grandmother's attempt at conversation by saying, "Grandma, you know I don't do idle chit chat."

Recently, I've learned that when motivated, he can express himself well in writing. In his first letter home, he asked me to send him a new book. I wrote back to clarify what he wanted and waited for a reply that never came. I don't know if he missed my question or ignored it but weeks later, I learned what he was waiting for. "For the love of God send me the book. How hard is it for you to understand? Go to a bookstore, mall, Target or Wal-mart. Hell go to K-Mart or Sears. I just want the book. Sorry for snapping. I just want some new reading material ... I feel like you are ignoring my letters or just not reading them." Clearly, as I waited for his reply to my question, he waited for the book. The relative time warp of snail mail made it impossible to clarify something so simple. How did we ever survive before electronic communication?

Soon we'll see him at family weekend. I'll get the dirt on the things that used to be as familiar to me as my own life – whether he is sleeping, if he likes his teachers, and most importantly, if he's made a friend. I'll see how others interact with him and how he responds. I'll keep stalking the mail carrier, hoping the letters get a bit newsier. When I'm truly desperate for information I'll bug the headmaster, who has dial-up Internet and a land line to keep disconnected parents updated. I'll visit the void and fill it with new challenges and opportunities. And I'll step back from the whirlwind of being the helicopter mother of a special needs child.

Caryn Sullivan lives in Mendota Heights with her family. Her essay, "Dancing with Despair" is featured in *Special Gifts: Women Writers on the Heartache, the Happiness and the Hope of Raising a Special Needs Child* (Wyatt-MacKenzie, July 2007). Her email address is carynsullivan@comcast.net.