

A View
FROM AN
Empty Nest

BONNIE BETH SPARRMAN



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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A View from an Empty Nest

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-7389-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-7369-7390-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sparrman, Bonnie Beth, author.

Title: A view from an empty nest : surprising, poignant, wonderful things on the horizon / Bonnie Sparrman.

Description: Eugene : Harvest House Publishers, 2018. | Series: Just for mom devotions

Identifiers: LCCN 2017061161 (print) | LCCN 2018007817 (ebook) | ISBN 9780736973908 (ebook) | ISBN 9780736973892 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Empty nesters—Prayers and devotions. | Mothers—Prayers and devotions. | BISAC: RELIGION / Christian Life / Women's Issues. | RELIGION / Christian Life / Family.

Classification: LCC BV4847 (ebook) | LCC BV4847 .S68 2018 (print) | DDC 242/.6431—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017061161>

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Printed in China

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 / RDS-SK / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Eric Paul Sparrman

My love, with whom the nest began,
and with whom it remains secure.

*Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and
love—and the greatest of these is love.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13 NLT

Acknowledgments

First and most importantly, I am grateful to God for trusting me with children to love, raise, and release. Additionally, I owe enormous thanks to Eric, my loving husband, who gave me this good life as a wife and a mother and keeps me grounded. I am also grateful to our parents, Elaine and Bendt Bladel and Paul and Gunnie Sparrman, who selflessly let their children go so we could grow up together. They instilled confidence by allowing us to develop our own life and by not clinging too much.

Our children—Johanna (and husband, Dustin), Bjorn, Karl-Jon, and our bonus daughter, Isabel from Germany—enrich our lives every day. They are the reasons I can claim many miracles in the name of Jesus. They have taught me more lessons of faith than they know, and to a person, make me intensely proud of their loving hearts and the way they instill peace wherever they are.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Todd Hafer, who asked me to share the stories of my empty nest. Also, sincere thanks to Gene Skinner for his talented editing and encouragement along the way.

Though I write in solitude, I am never alone. I owe a huge thank-you to my sister Randi Sparrman, for sharing her faith and insights with me. I am also deeply grateful for the encouragement and blessing of my sisters Kristen Mesedahl and Julie Bladel, and for dear friends: Shelley Frew, Joy Larson, Jean Bristow, Barbara Swanson, Lora “Gus” Plude, Shelly Olson, Karen Huse, Heidi Gustafson, Sue Beck, Kathie and Lee Glenn, our dear Reynard Drive family, and our core group, a.k.a. the World’s Worst Parents. Together we have loved our children and eventually encouraged them to fly. Many thanks to each of you for bolstering my faith. What a privilege and joy to trust that God goes with our children and yet remains with us, replacing emptiness with new adventures.

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The Chapter Before the First

*Surely I am with you always,
to the very end of the age.*

MATTHEW 28:20

Last summer we watched with great interest as a mother purple finch carefully crafted a home for her family in a mass of pussy willows that I had tucked into a birch basket next to our front door. Apparently, she didn't realize that location is the first rule of real estate. Or she did, and chose a place that was protected from wind and rain. What she failed to consider, however, was the number of times people run in and out of our front door on any given day. For a couple of weeks, I cordoned off the front walk and porch, lest anyone bother this devoted mother and her loyal mate. With finches, it's the female who builds the nest, though the male brings building materials to the site. We watched them, incoming with bits of twigs, cedar tips, grasses, moss, and finally mud that attached the nest to the pussy willows and eventually to the wall of our

house. Mrs. Finch built her home with gusto and efficiency as her husband flapped about, cheering her on. We admired their perfect nest, just the right size, beautifully rounded and soft inside, lined with fur and fuzz.

What came next was nothing less than thrilling. Mama finch sat firmly in the nest, black eyes darting about, as her helpmate brought her meals. And then came the eggs. She produced one each day for three days in a row. Their perfection and beauty took my breath away, with their lovely shape and gentle shade of aqua with dark speckles. In my opinion they were the epitome of springtime itself.

Occasionally, especially during warm afternoons, Mrs. Finch left the nest to fly between the trees in our garden. I could only imagine how stiff she might feel after sitting on eggs all day and all night. It's what a mother bird is designed to do, but it doesn't mean it's always comfortable, and I was glad to see she allowed herself these little breaks during her confinement.

My husband and I peeked into the nest every morning. We were terribly curious about our porch's wild little inhabitants in the throes of starting a family. A mother bird is a picture of patience and beauty, sitting dutifully on her nest of eggs. For two weeks, she held fast to her maternal post while Mr. Finch stayed close by and kept her well fed.

Fortunately, the windows in our front door allowed us a view of the nest without disturbing the expectant mother. We waited with the couple until one morning a bit of commotion

announced the “hatch day” had arrived. Mama finch didn’t sit still as usual. Instead she shifted from side to side and stood up to turn around. As she did, we spied a pathetic little bird head, no larger than a raspberry, under her breast. The baby’s neck was limp, but its mouth was open wide, waiting for breakfast. On each of the subsequent two days, another egg cracked open, exposing a baby bird, fuzzy, wiggly, and full of life. The nest was so full, we feared the little ones might fall out and drop a considerable distance to the porch floor below. But we had no need to worry; the finches had their domestic life in order. The babies’ days vacillated between ruckus mealtimes and long naps, and once in a while Mom and Dad finch stole away for a little while, probably to gather food or, we liked to imagine, to enjoy a much-needed date.

For two weeks, the baby finches opened their mouths to their parents, who tucked little bugs and seeds down their throats. The enthusiastic eaters expanded before our eyes. And much like little children, they rolled around, stepped on each other, and competed for Mom and Dad’s attention. It was a delight to watch this family. But for finches, “nest days” pass quickly.

Flying lessons began one sunny morning when the air was clear and cool, and sunshine promised balmy days to come. The eggs were not laid all on the same day, and the baby birds didn’t fly on the same day either. I surmised that like children, they took off in the order in which they arrived. One by one, the nestlings bravely flung themselves from the nest, clumsily

at first, flying in fits and starts with Mom and Dad nearby. It was exciting to watch each little one find its wings and discover freedom in the air. But I wasn't prepared for what came next.

Somehow, I expected the adolescent birds to return to the nest, at least at night to sleep at home and enjoy a good meal and the protection of their parents. But that's not the pattern for finches. Once our feathered friends took off, that was it. In a few days, all we had left to show for the little family to which we had grown attached was a nest that held broken eggshells, a few feathers, lots of bird droppings, and mud.

As I considered the empty nest, I felt a little let down by the brevity of a bird's gestation and infancy. The finches came, built their home, laid eggs, incubated, hatched, fed, and flew away in just one month's time. I could hardly keep up. As I filled a bucket with soapy water to clean up the mess the birds left behind, I thought how fitting it was to have an empty nest by our front door. As I peered in once again, this time noticing lifeless emptiness, I was reminded of the empty bedrooms in our house. Although our children didn't come and go quite as quickly as the finches, the years of having babies and then pre-schoolers who soon started school and in no time at all became high schoolers...those years sped along incredibly fast. Our nest filled and our nest emptied, leaving us a bit stunned that anything so big and all-consuming could pass with such speed. Did I sleep through it? Did I pay close enough attention to what was happening in the middle of the roller-coaster ride of raising children? How did *I* wind up with an empty nest?

One evening recently, I told my husband I felt more unprepared for this season of life than any other. Like the finches, we had been enthusiastic to create a home and start a family. The beginning was thrilling as we produced three babies in rather close succession. As parenthood started, everything seemed new and exciting! Of course, at times we felt dog tired and overwhelmed as our little ones filled our car to the max and tumbled with each other on the rug after supper like a pile of puppies.

But God in His wisdom usually gives children to young parents, who have generous reserves of energy. Except perhaps when one has an infant, parents of little kids have enough pep to keep up with the demands of the day. And we do so for years...until eventually the last one leaves home, and there we are, staring at empty coat hooks and vacated bunk beds.

The transition to parenthood was a journey that in its infancy required enormous change for us moms. We adjusted priorities, schedules, our social life, income, career, and even the way we interacted with our spouses. We sacrificed much to mother our children. Being a parent has a way of working strands of selfishness out of us simply because babies and kids have needs that surpass our own. We give and give and give for a couple of decades, and we wake up one day to a very quiet house.

On this hushed day, we are not the same person we were before the babies arrived. Such a tremendous odyssey as raising children couldn't possibly leave us unchanged. The years of

mothering try us and teach us many things. Hopefully, every day we grow intellectually and spiritually. Physically, over eighteen or twenty-some-odd years, we have changed as well. It may require a bit more sleep to revive us than when we were twenty-seven. And we may not run as fast as we used to.

Whatever our unique situation as our nests empty, it is my hope that each one of us will realistically consider what is particularly challenging about this new phase of being a mom. Do we flip back and forth, jumping for joy one minute and crying over a deep sense of loss the next? Do we pause long enough to recognize the ache in our heart as grief? Does loneliness follow us? Do worries about kids who have recently flown invade our thoughts? What happens to our identity without our precious offspring in our home?

As we adjust to life without children under our roof, may we do the work of intentionally sorting through the emotions of missing them. Let's be realistic and honest with ourselves about feelings of loss and loneliness. By identifying our feelings during this transition, positive and negative, we can discover newfound freedom as a backdrop for renewed joy and energy.

Let's also remember that we do not empty our nest all by ourselves. God surely was by our side, whether we were aware of it or not, when our homes filled with the clamor and commotion of children. And thank God, He remains with us, holding our hands as these same kiddos venture out into independent lives. I will frequently refer to this piece of Scripture

through the pages of this book: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

God *is* with us, giving us strength, comfort, courage, and so much healing love. Because of Him, I’ve written the following devotions to encourage moms whose children are in launch mode. Each section is based on a piece of Scripture, intended to draw us closer to God’s gracious love as we allow our children to fly. In the process, may we give ourselves permission to enjoy life in a grand new phase that allows some freedoms we haven’t known for years.