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THE OPRAH
MAGAZINE

DREAM BIG

WHY YOUR CRAZY IDEA
MIGHT NOT BE SO CRAZY

HOW'D SHE DO IT?!
Secrets of women who
are doing what they want

PLUS: ENTER THE "O"
BIG-DREAM CONTEST

OPRAH talks to her
talk-show mentor
PHIL DONAHUE

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Adrienne was facing the empty-nest syndrome and she didn't know what to do with herself. **JULIE MORGENSTERN**, soon to face the same situation, helps a working mother grapple with joy, grief, endings, and beginnings.

He's Leaving Home

HER WONDERFUL (AND ONLY) SON WAS starting college, and Adrienne was facing a profound transition. Confronting an empty nest requires enormous reorganization—only it's not files or an office you're trying to rearrange, but the very architecture of your life, your identity, and your connection to someone you love.

Parenting provides a solid nucleus around which your life can revolve. The two hardest aspects of any major transition are the ambiguity and loss of control. Comforting routines and cherished activities disappear. Adrienne's predicament hit home for me because for the past 17 years I've made every decision in relation to taking care of and being there for my daughter, Jessi, who will leave for college next year. I hoped that by helping Adrienne I'd also make my own transition easier to deal with.

When I met with Adrienne, a well-respected writer who's been married for 20 years, I was struck by how simultaneously elegant and down-to-earth she was. "I know it's not supposed to be true, but my son is the most important thing in my life," she said. Right after Sean was born, she

recalled, someone told her to think of him as a visitor, a guest in her home. To that end, she happily structured her life to savor his stay and rarely worked full-time. The result: Adrienne and Sean are very close, with easy communication—which has enabled her to withstand the times he needed some emotional distance.

In a gentle but unyielding way, Sean has been creating a life of his own. Adrienne, whose habit had been to turn down her son's covers each night, found herself taken aback when Sean told her one night, "Mom, don't bother." Recently at dinner, he casually mentioned the possibility of going to Atlanta with some friends for a weekend. As Adrienne fought to keep her eyes in their sockets, she wondered, When did he stop asking for permission? "It's hard to truly fathom who he is now," she said.

Not surprisingly, Adrienne, 51, is struggling with a confluence of emotions: *Oh my God, I can't bear that he's going!* mixed with *Oh my God, I'm so happy he's going!* Years ago she'd orchestrated a mother-son trip to Japan. Last year Sean planned a return trip—this time solo. At the airport, Sean waved, ▶

turned, and marched bravely toward his adventure, suitcase in hand. Watching him walk away, Adrienne was overwhelmed with pride, awe, joy—and grief. Six hours later, Sean called from his stopover in Los Angeles to announce his arrival and say, “Thanks for not crying, Mom.”

No matter how sad we feel, our goal is to make it easy for our children to go

skills, and remarked wistfully, “Now I think I understand what being homesick will be like.”

On the deepest level, Adrienne feared that even if Sean was homesick he’d become inaccessible, come back a different person, and disconnect from his family. How could we organize this process so that Adrienne would feel more grounded?

for Adrienne filled both of us with a sense of relief. She loved having ways to take charge of the transition instead of just letting it happen. I was beginning to see that there was a future beyond the separation.

Two weeks later, I checked in with Adrienne. When she’d first raised the topic of navigating their adult relationship, Sean’s reaction was typical: “Uh! Mom, I’m