

March, 2021

I cried today, because it's my son's first day of school.

He is 16. It's his first day at school after 375 days at home.

I remember his **very** first day at school so vividly and know the spot on my head where my hair was almost yanked out. He was three years old, it was warm, I wore a sundress, and I took him to the local preschool where I had enrolled him for three half-days each week. I had read all the books, all the Parenting Magazine articles about how to prepare him, how to help him practice opening his lunchbox at home so that he'd be confident opening it at school without everything falling out, and how to wash his hands well. I had even emailed the other mothers from his class, none of whom I knew, to ask if anyone would like to meet up before the first day so that the kids could then 'recognize' each other in the classroom. Only one mother responded (we are friends — and our boys are still classmates — to this day,) and so my son even had the chance to practice making friends. If we practice a little, it won't be so startling, disorienting, scary. Then once he gets going, he will be ok.

As we walked from the parking lot, my son's hand tightened around mine. He was fine, but not. What they don't tell you in the parenting magazines is this: practice is good, it helps; but you cannot practice the feelings. We went to his classroom to meet the two teachers - one a seasoned, 20-year educator, and one a young, bubbly 20-something. My son was not impressed, and his squeeze turned into a tug as he politely asked me to please pick him up. After holding him and trying to mingle with kids and toys for 10 minutes, I felt the veteran teacher nudge me. She said, "It's time to go, Mom, you can give him to me. He'll be fine! We are going to have a great time together."

That's when his tears started - silent tears because he was trying so hard to be brave. Again, I had done my research and knew that he would indeed be fine, that this was classic separation and was not harming him, and that the sooner I left, the easier and better it would be for him. I lifted him off my hip and passed him to his caring new teacher. But my boy, the smartie, had a grip now on my sundress strap and on a good amount of my hair. As he was switched to his teacher's arms, he kept his yank on me and my whole head jerked forward. The strength of his tiny hand was poetic, really. It took several minutes to pry his fingers off, each one returning to its grip as I moved on to the next finger, but finally I retreated to the cafeteria downstairs and cried. Twenty minutes later his teacher called me to say that he was ok, as the books said he likely would be. I was fine, but not.

Today, my 16-year-old is armed with high-quality face masks. He knows how to wash his hands even better. He and his sister have been some of the very lucky ones - still thriving at home during remote school while deeply missing their friends and routines. And they are lucky at school as well - small schools, new ventilation, an abundance of supplies. Benefits that are not available to most. I still wonder about the risks. I'm, you know - a parent.

Today, I'm crying for the resilience he's been forced to learn. Well mostly it's that.

A few weeks ago, his school arranged some outdoor, distanced meet-ups for his class, in advance of the return. He had a wonderful time. I packed his lunch that morning, realizing that I would soon have to deal with a separation that I had never thought I'd repeat, or at least, not until college. I handed him his lunch, including a thermos of hot stew with utensils, and told him I also packed an extra spoon in a separate bag, "just in case the first one falls on the ground." He grinned and said that my telling him about the extra spoon was the best moment in his day.

We are designed for all of these things, I guess. The protection, the separation, the bittersweet, the curiosity, the planning, the trust, the gripping, the letting go. Isn't all of this how we are supposed to learn who we are?

Instead of a call from his teacher, I got a heart emoji from my son's phone as he started his day on campus. Back to high school after a still-going, year-long pandemic that none of the parenting magazines could have told me to practice for. And his hair is too short for me to hang onto.