We are now reaching an important day in the life of many American families, maybe as important as a christening, a wedding, or a funeral. It is the day we drop a child off for the first year of college.

It is a milestone for our 18-year-olds, but as a society, we have found no ritual way to commemorate it. Mothers and fathers, sometimes siblings or an uncle or an aunt, tote heavy boxes up flights of residence hall stairs, usually in hot weather. There is an awkward, tearful goodbye while standing next to a car with its motor running, and then another American adolescent steps into a greater degree of independence, and an empty bedroom opens up at home.

This day will be very tough for these children. They will be excited, bursting with anticipation about a new phase of life, and also acutely anxious, hoping desperately for one thing above all others—social acceptance. As John Updike wrote, “We are all chords that others must strike.” These kids are about to meet the orchestra.

It can also be tough for parents. My older daughter attended the college where I taught. It was less than a quarter-mile from our home. We moved her in, and my wife went home, lay down on the couch, and stayed there the entire day, inconsolable. “Honey,” I said, “she is a quarter of a mile away.” (In fact, it was so close that if I walked our dog and did not direct her, she would lead me to the building on campus where Julia lived.)

My wife told me it was not an issue of geography but of time’s passing. Julia was leaving home, at least symbolically, and we were no longer young parents.

Being a sensitive, Alan Alda–type male, I said, “Yeah, whatever,” and mowed the lawn, knowing my firstborn was close by. (Men mourn with the help of power tools.)

I have been a professor and a parent for 30 years now, and I would like to offer some advice to those of you about to send a son or daughter off to college:

• Urge your child to be responsible for her education. There is paperwork. There is bureaucracy. Students need to learn to be punctual and diligent and attentive to detail, and often it is all a pain in the butt. But if you take care of their registration, their drops and adds and grade inquiries, they won’t learn to.

• Urge your child to seek out faculty members and talk with them. If a child is having problems in a course, she should go to the professor.

• Urge your child to be diplomatic. Most first-year college students had their own room at home. It had a TV, a computer, and a stereo; it was their own personal spaceship. Now they have to respect another person’s rights, habits, preferences, and idiosyncrasies. Adult life is 95 percent negotiation, and in a residence hall it approaches 100 percent.

• When conflict arises, get the whole story. Nobody’s child is ever 100 percent right. You are often far more useful as an impartial sounding board than as a committed advocate. Students need to try to solve things for themselves first. Intervene only if the situation absolutely demands it.

• Remember, first-year college students call home in the darkest hour of their despair. At 2 a.m., they will unfold a tale of abject horror. Their professors are sadists, their roommate is a Satan-worshiper, and the food is poisoned. Also, the boyfriend did not call. You will lie awake worrying, and you will call back in the morning. What? No, nothing is wrong. (The boyfriend called.)

And so in conclusion: Parents, it is time to start letting go! Four years from now, you want to watch proudly as a well-educated adult marches across the platform at graduation. This is what you want for your child: a rich, three-dimensional adulthood. To do that she must become a person wise in judgment, generous in dispute, patient with peers, and able to put in the strenuous intellectual effort it takes to make the most of the amazing opportunities college makes available.

This is going to be harder than high school. Your child will need to look inside herself and find discipline. It can’t be found anywhere else.

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From hatchbacks, trunks, and cargo areas of countless vehicles came duffle bags, suitcases, plastic storage bins, boxes large and small, and even trash bags filled with everything from tennis racquets to teddy bears. Family members hoisted loads on their shoulders, stacked them on hand trucks, and filled their arms again and again for yet another long trek to the dorm room. The Observer caught up with these parents on Aug. 27, as they dropped off their sons and daughters for their first year of college. There were many smiles, a few jokes about the spare room, and some teary moments.