

NewsRoom

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Section: Opinion

Commentary: Lessons from the start of a school year

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The sense of renewal that I experience every year with the beginning of a new school year is tempered this time by the mixed emotions of taking my last child to college. This week, I began my 37th year as a law professor and feel just as excited about the start of school as when I taught my initial class in August 1980. But this week I also took my daughter, my youngest of four children, to start college in New York and feel both excitement for her and the wistfulness of a huge phase of my life being over.

One of the joys of being an academic is the wonderful feeling of a new beginning at the start of each school year. Washington Post sportswriter Thomas Boswell wrote a book about baseball titled, "Why Time Begins on Opening Day." Opening day, like the first day of a new school year, offers the sense of starting over and the anticipation of all the good things that hopefully will follow. Every team and every student has a perfect record to start the year.

I am teaching constitutional law to first-year law students this fall and I cannot help but share their excitement at starting a new path in their lives. For weeks, I have been mentally planning my first class and thinking about the things I want to do differently this semester.

As a parent, I also always have been acutely aware of the cycles of the academic calendar and the process of getting my children ready for each school year. I know their bittersweet feelings (admittedly sometimes more bitter than sweet) at the end of summer and of their adjusting to waking up early, buying school supplies, learning about their new teachers and getting back into the routine of homework.

This has been my life for a long time. My oldest child is 33. It means I have spent the last 33 years with a child under 18 in my household. Now I feel the strangeness and even sadness of realizing that this phase of my life is done. No longer will I have a child to wake for school. No longer will I have anyone to nag to be sure homework is done.

Being at this point obviously is no surprise, and I would not want it any other way. My daughter is clearly ready to go to college. I have told her that this all would be easier if she had been a difficult teenager; then we still would miss her, but the departure would perhaps be tinged with a sense of relief. But she has been remarkably easy and invariably

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cooperative. I have told her repeatedly that I would not want her at home living in our basement, especially because we don't have a basement.

For those fortunate enough to go to college, and especially those fortunate enough to go to college away from home, it has the possibility of being a truly magical stage of life. For most, it is a unique chance to be self-indulgent, to live independently and to focus on studying and learning and being with friends and discovering one's passions.

If I could go back and redo one phase of my life, it would be college. I was a very diligent college student, but know I would get so much more out of it if only I could do it again.

I know children come back from college and we still will take family vacations together. Yet I also realize it will never be the same. From now on, she, like her siblings, will come back to visit. She never will have our home as her primary residence; never again will I set a curfew for her. I know my role as a parent will last my whole life. But it just is forever different once a child goes off to college.

I think from now on, when I see parents taking their children for school supplies in August, I will feel like an ex-pat living outside the country on Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July. I will know what they are experiencing, but no longer is it my life.

So on Monday, my wife and I took Mara to college and returned to a house without children. On Tuesday, I taught my first class to 48 very eager first-year law students. It all feels so familiar and so new, too.

Erwin Chemerinsky is dean of the UC Irvine School of Law.

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