REVISED AND UPDATED

BARBARA AND SUSAN'S Guide TO THE Empty Nest

Discovering New Purpose, Passion,
and Your Next Great Adventure

BARBARA RAINEY AND SUSAN YATES

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To the ten women who have prayed
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We are so thankful for you, for your
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us in what God has called us to do.

Your prayers have made all the difference!

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And to each one of the women who has let us share her story, we will always be grateful. In some cases we've changed her name for privacy, but each story is true. And we are thankful for you, our reader. You make our joy complete (1 John 1:4). We hope that as you join us in this adventure, you will discover new friends and a new purpose for this special season in life.

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PART ONE

We're in This Together

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Chapter 1

Who in the World Are Barbara and Susan?

> A wise parent humors the desire for independent action, so as to become the friend and advisor when [her] absolute rule shall cease.
>
> Elizabeth Gaskell

So who are Barbara and Susan? Good question. If either of us had pulled a book off the shelf and seen the names of authors we didn't recognize, we'd wonder: *Who are these women? Why are they writing this book? What do they have to offer me?*

When we first wrote this book several years ago, we were relatively new to the season of the empty nest. Now that we are further along in this season we are surprised at how relevant these concepts are to women at every stage of the empty nest. Of all the seasons in life, this one seems to have the most ebbs and flows!

In this revised and updated edition, we have added some new stories and new lessons learned. As you'll discover in the pages that

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follow, the empty nest is an evolving journey that still requires faith just as our years of parenting did.

Our bios in the back of the book don't tell you much about the real person, so right at the start we thought we'd tell you a little more about ourselves.

Getting to Know Barbara

I clearly remember thinking that my mother was old the year she turned thirty-two. We were returning from an afternoon at the Warren Dunes State Park on the southern shores of Lake Michigan, and she had been pulled over by a policeman. For some reason she couldn't remember her age when the trooper asked. As an eight-year-old, I was amazed that she had forgotten and promptly helped by answering the question for her.

She must have forgotten because she's old, I thought. Never mind that she had three kids and visiting relatives in the car and was probably embarrassed and flustered. Somehow in that all-too-hasty assessment of my mother's age, I decided I would never grow old like my mom.

What on earth was I thinking? I'm way past thirty-two now; childhood and youth are a distant memory. I had six kids in ten years, did homeschooling and public schooling, and sent them off to college. I've orchestrated and helped with five weddings, survived a prodigal's years of rebellion, and started welcoming grandkids into the expanding Rainey clan. I'm still adjusting to my status as an "older" (not old, mind you) woman whose kids are grown.

My emotions, however, are more like those of my teen years—all over the place. I bounce between excitement and fear about the future. I've wondered what I'm good at, and I've pondered what choices I should make with my time. I look in the mirror and see the effects of aging that I was sure would never show up on my face and body. Some days I feel old and sad and tired, but most days I still feel as energetic and enthusiastic as I did in my twenties or thirties.

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I remember my precious grandmother once telling me that sometimes when she walked by a store window and caught her reflection in the glass, she would do a double take, not recognizing the old woman in the window as herself. She told me she felt as young inside as she did at thirty. She was then in her early seventies, with beautiful silver hair and a wonderful heart of love. But to me she was old, nearly fifty years my senior, and I couldn't understand how she could feel anything other than old.

Now I understand. I'm discovering that this season of life is complicated and confusing, and there is no guidebook for walking this road. And I'm also seeing that this empty-nest journey is not a short, easy, or well-mapped hike. But I have concluded, for now anyway, that the cause behind my emotional wavering is a transitioning self-identity. At the core of this is the realization that I'm not needed as I once was.

Recently, I journaled these thoughts to try to make sense of what I was feeling:

> Before I married, I was looking for love. I daydreamed of being chosen, of becoming a bride, of being the most important person in his life . . . loved for a lifetime.
>
> Then, two years after the wedding, I discovered something new. Our first child, Ashley, was born, and I was instantly needed in a way I'd never been needed before. Yes, my husband had needed me before this child came into my life and he still does, but this baby and all the other children that followed needed me for their very survival. And that dependency changed my life.
>
> A mysterious change took place in me when I became a mother. Though the change was gradual, its roots grew down deep into my soul. Being a mother defined my life daily. It forced me out of bed early each day for thirty years. Caring for these little people consumed my thoughts. Guiding them, directing them, training them, disciplining them, praying constantly for them. I wanted to do it well. It gave my life purpose. It became my identity. "Mother" was who I was, and I considered it an honor.
>
> Though I had other interests that were often frustrated in their fulfillment, and though many of my daily tasks were often mundane

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and aggravating, still the task of mothering was my life's purpose, my *raison d'être*. Long after my children were physically able to care for themselves, I knew they still needed me for comfort and love and direction and support.

And I discovered that I needed them. I had become attached to my role. I liked being important in their lives. It was deeply gratifying that when they got hurt, they always wanted me and no one else. No one could comfort them the way I could. Not even their dad. It felt good.

When Ashley left for college, I saw the end in sight. It was ten years away, but visible on the horizon. Knowing that the end of such a grand journey was nearing, I determined to invest in the experience all the more. In the last five or six years, I spent more time at the school volunteering than I ever had before. I drove the carpool to more games and events. I wanted to be where my teens were. I wanted to know their friends, their teachers, their world, because for so long they had been mine.

And now, now that the kids are gone, I wonder: Am I needed anymore? By anyone? Does anyone *really* need me?

Getting to Know Susan

When we had five kids—including a set of twins—in seven years, I was overwhelmed. Those early years are now blurred memories of sleep deprivation, feelings of inadequacy, and amazement at the intensity of my love for each child.

And when those five became teenagers, the stakes seemed higher. How do I set limits yet let go? How do I prepare them to leave home? Would they be ready? Would I?

No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't stop time. College applications were sent; acceptances and rejections came back, bringing tears of joy and outright despair. The applause of graduation became the trepidation of orientation. And then the good-byes came. Mixed emotions—stiff upper lips, joyous anticipation, free-flowing tears. There was simply no way to predict how each of us would react.

My twenty-one-inch newborn son who needed me every waking moment was now six-foot-two and pushing for independence.

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Those two little twins fearfully climbing onto the bus for their first day of school were now stepping into wedding dresses to walk down the aisle.

And it all seemed to have gone by so fast. Too fast.

Because our kids were so close in age, we felt the intensity of the emptying nest for seven years as they all graduated from high school and left for college. In some ways I felt that I hardly had time to process what was happening; as soon as one left, there was another one preparing to leave. Still, with all the different breaks that college schedules brought, the kids were home a lot, usually bringing friends with them. So in those years the house didn't feel very empty.

Then life in the Yates household took another turn, when our oldest, Allison, got married right after graduating from college. John, our second oldest, was a junior in college. Chris was graduating from high school, and the twins, Susy and Libby, were sophomores in high school. We found ourselves dealing with the emotions of Allison and Will's wedding and Chris's leaving at the same time.

Over the next few years, our seasons continued to merge as all of our kids married young. In fact, we had four more weddings in three summers! Along the way I experienced a wide variety of emotions, but it wasn't until Susy moved her stuff out of our house the day after Libby's wedding that the permanence of the empty nest hit. I had a meltdown. This is my journal entry from that day:

> Empty rooms.
>
> I hate bare rooms. I really hate them when they are my daughters'. The pictures in Susy's room are down—that one of the twins hugging each other, the one showing crooked teeth and a silly grin surrounded by old-fashioned bangs, that first prom date depicting awkward posture, betraying nervousness mingled with excitement, glimpses of a lady about to burst forth from a child's body—a future and a hope.
>
> Her closet used to be so full of things that you could hardly close the door. Hangers draped with her clothes, Libby's clothes, her brother's "cool" hand-me-down clothes. But now it's just a few empty

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hangers, and they are the "old timey" wire ones. She even took the good plastic ones with her!

Staring at emptiness, I see one old, discarded blue prom dress in the corner. It's way out of style. It hangs there lonely, out of place as if to say, "Where are all the others? I don't belong here all alone."

Just the way I feel.

My life was like that closet used to be. So crammed, so full, great diversity, comings and goings, opening and shutting doors, happy voices, phones ringing.

And now it's quiet. Too quiet.

I, like the old blue dress, feel deserted, lost, and out of place. Where are all the others? They belong here.

Will You Join Us?

As you can see, we were two friends experiencing different phases of the empty nest. We both struggled with the awkward transition. We had many honest talks about what we were going through ourselves, and we talked to other women in various stages of the empty nest.

One of the main things we realized is that we need friends to walk through this season with us. Our husbands can't always appreciate the changes we face, and our mothers are from a different generation.

The empty-nest season is much like Jell-O, hard to grab hold of and constantly changing shape. There's no mold that we can pass on to others, no consistency. The empty nest affects us each differently, but there is comfort through friends who can reassure us that we are normal and who can remind us of a God who does have a plan.

We hope you will accept our invitation to join our friendship. We long for you to come alongside us as we grapple with questions like these:

- Has anyone else felt like I do now that my kids are gone?
- What now?

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- Who am I?
- Who do I want to be?

We aren't psychologists or counselors. We're simply two friends who want to share what we've learned and what we're still learning. We want to give you hope for the future and challenge you to live out this season with new purpose and great adventure.

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