Parents left behind
An ambiguous journey

SULETTE FERREIRA

I read somewhere that airports are story-making factories: people waiting to watch their loved ones walk further and further away from them until they can no longer be seen. Today is my turn ... you with a backpack filled with dreams on your way to another continent and me with my memories bidding you farewell, not knowing when I will see you again. I wanted to paste a red and white “Fragile: Handle with care” sticker like a Band Aid plaster over my heart to ease the pain ...

This is the experience of many South African parents left behind after the emigration of an adult-child. Migration across continents and regions has been part of human existence for centuries but never have so many people had to wrestle with the loss of a loved one due to dreams and or career opportunities in another country or on another continent as right now.

The South African Institute for Race Relations estimates that around 800 000 South Africans emigrated in the decade from 1995 to 2005. According to City Press, between 2006
and 2016 another 102,793 emigrants left South Africa. The average age of the emigrants was between 25 and 29 resulting in a growing generation of parents having to adapt their lives to include their children and grandchildren not living in close proximity as well as being part of a transnational family.

Among all the changes human beings must face throughout their lives, few are as wide and complex as those that take place during migration. This is true not only for the emigrant but also for those left behind. Emigration is something that never really ends – for both parent and child.

During my studies, parents left behind shared their unique perceptions and personal journeys with me. To capture the essence of the South African emigration “story”, I identified the following stages in the parent’s journey of their adult-child’s emigration:

• Stage 1: Pre-emigration involves the decision-making process, reasons for emigration, and whether emigration is to be temporary or permanent.

• Stage 2: The act of migration itself is very short. It is viewed as a life-altering experience for parents left behind. It is the culmination of a period of preparation leading up to the final event, the adult-child physically leaving. Leaving the country is the first tangible experience of loss for parents left behind, who now associate airports with loss and emotional turmoil.

• Stage 3: Post-emigration of the adult-child is the stage in which the parent has to deal with the fact that the child has physically left and that the relationship as it was known has irrevocably changed. The child has moved physically not just from the neighbourhood, suburb or town, they have moved to another country, even another time zone; therefore, there is a loss of proximity due to geographical distance. The geographical distance has a life-altering effect on the relationship as it was known. This type of loss is an example of ambiguous loss.

What is ambiguous loss?
Ambiguous loss is a distinctive kind of loss that is immobilising, confusing and defies closure. The ambiguous loss experienced by South African parents left behind runs like a golden thread through the whole emigration process. Ambiguous loss is an uncertain and incomplete loss that impedes on grieving; it freezes the grieving process.

This type of loss is not always recognised by society, and subsequently the magnitude of the loss is frequently not acknowledged. Special occasions such as birthdays, weddings and births are particularly difficult. Parents feel childless because they are unable to be physically part of these special occasions. They miss their grandchildren and mourn missed opportunities to develop a bond with them. The ambiguity of the situation makes it difficult to come to terms with the loss and there are no prescribed rituals for dealing with it. However, ambiguous loss is not always problematic – people can learn to live with uncertainty.

The migrating child also experiences losses from emigration – loss of people, belongings, and familiar surroundings as well as the connectedness to their birth country. The child has to focus on building a new life in a foreign country and has many new responsibilities and challenges. The parent left behind, on the other hand, has to move from focusing on “what could have been … what might have been …” to finding new ways of communicating and maintaining the attachment bond.

The parent-child bond

The parent-child bond is the most fundamental of all human relationships and remains distinctive because of its capacity to thrive and endure throughout the life of both generations. Studies of families in advanced age suggest that ageing parents and their adult-children typically remain involved with one another for life. Geographically so apart and often separated by multiple time zones, they still constitute a family – they share a history and a future. The challenge is to maintain transnational communication in order to preserve this parent-child attachment bond.

Social media

However, social technologies give distant individuals the means to manage and maintain connection. Modern communication technologies such as email, SMS and WhatsApp, and Skype have created a “global village” in which families can communicate with each other across the world, enhancing the immediacy and frequency of contact between loved ones. More immediate and effective than in the days of letters and expensive phone calls, they are used to overcome the physical separation, maintain and reinforce relationships, and stay actively involved in each other’s lives. This “virtual” bond makes it easier than ever before to stay close to family and friends.

While much emotional investment goes into maintaining transnational contact, being physically together is still the ultimate goal of the parent left behind. The longing to be embraced, the touch and the handshake remain a hope and aspiration. But if physical visits are not possible, never give up the effort of keeping in contact and sharing personal experiences and milestones. Parents are therefore encouraged to maintain multiple links to social networks and to master the latest communication technologies in order to stay in touch.

Ultimately, migration is about memory and, most importantly, memory of relationships. The parent-child bond has the potential to endure even over multiple time zones.

Finding meaning ...

How does a parent find meaning in this ambiguous journey of loss when their child emigrates? There are no clear-cut answers – finding meaning is a very personal and complex challenge. However, folk wisdom declares that there are two lasting gifts parents can give their children – one is roots and the other is wings. The well-known wisdom of Kahlil Gibran concerning children says: “You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth …” It takes a special parent to raise a child to have the confidence and courage to undertake the daunting task of emigration.

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