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The Empty Nest

One of the best things about spring is that everything around us is growing. Leaves are coming out, flowers are blooming, and gardens are growing. Speaking of that last item, I have a confession to make: I love gardening, whether it be edibles or ornamentals, but I can be horribly lazy about it.

Case in point: the hanging planter on our front porch. We inherited it from the previous occupant of our house when we moved in last year. Since that time I've thought how cheerful it would look if I planted some colorful annuals in it. But I never got around to it, and all it grew last year were some volunteer weeds and two baby maples that probably came from an aerial seed assault by their relatives who loom across the street.

This year, though, our planter grew something in addition to its motley assortment of herbaceous residents. It grew baby birds. Several weeks ago we noticed a nest had appeared in the planter where one had not been before.

A few days later, it seemed we couldn't go to the car without startling a robin from the front porch. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to deduce the identity of our new avian housemates. It was, as he would have said, quite elementary.

To my mind, having a bird nest on the front porch and a houseful of home-schooled boys just begged for all manner of educational opportunities. I could envision them drawing and coloring the pale blue eggs they saw after I lifted each boy in turn to peek into the planter.

They could see how the baby birds would open their mouths to be fed if we tapped the nest gently. I could take pictures every few days to show them how quickly the birds grew. Maybe we'd even get to see them leave the nest!

Oh, the opportunities that cheeped just outside our front door! Opportunities that we missed because I procrastinated. I took for granted that the birds were there and wasted my time with things that seemed so important at the moment.

Yesterday, I saw three large baby birds that could hardly fit into their nest. Today, as the boys and I left to run some errands, the nest was empty.

It may seem silly for a man whose eldest child is only ten to bemoan an empty nest, but bemoan it I do. I can't help regretting all the opportunities I've missed with my kids simply because I procrastinated.

How easy it is to get used to them being there and to assume they will always be there. But it wasn't that long ago that our nest was empty. Any day now, we will add a fourth young one to our fold. Some day soon, I will realize even he is gone, along with his brothers, and I will lament those moments I should have stolen with them – the fishing trips, bicycle rides at the park, and simply sitting with them giving them my undivided attention. That last one is the hardest.

When we got back from our errands this afternoon, our oldest exclaimed, “Look! A robin!” Perched just above our windshield in the neighbor’s dogwood was one of our baby birds. We crowded around the car door and enjoyed the view. He was small. His tail feathers were too short and his chest was mottled, but he was learning to fly.

I don’t imagine he will be there tomorrow. While I’m not watching, he will spread his wings and start his own life, perhaps finding an unused planter on another front porch and a mate with whom to share it. And it will all start again.

Father, Son, and Spirit, let me be watching while my kids are in the nest. Let me be there as they learn to fly.

~ *Steve Webb*