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Home has new meaning for a 20-something returnee

By Blane Bachelor

After having lived on my own in Houston; Tampa, Fla.; Fort Worth, Texas; and Barcelona, Spain, I - like many 20-somethings dealing with today's dismal job market - returned for a while to that warm, cozy place where the doors are always open and the cupboards are always full: home.

Except that when you come home as an adult - not just for a holiday or weekend visit, but to live - it's a whole different scenario. The door is not always open (especially not at 4 a.m., at which time its piercing squeak seems to increase by about 8,000 decibels). And the cupboards are not always full. (I hadn't heard my mom's dreaded threat: "We're going to eat up everything in this kitchen before I go shopping again!" since high school.)

Such realizations hit me full force when, at the age of 26, I moved back in with Mom and Dad. I wasn't the only one: Demographics experts estimate about 12 million people between the ages of 20 and 34 live at home, a number that has grown significantly in these times.

As one of those statistics for the better part of a year, I realized I was very fortunate to have my parents welcome me home for as long as I needed to stay. Still, "home" had a new meaning. When you live elsewhere, a trip home is a carefree getaway, a comforting escape from the bumps and bruises of the rat race. Favorite foods are bought. Special meals are cooked. Coddling and cash are doled out regularly.

On a more permanent "visit," the welcome mat is still on the porch but the welcoming committee has retired. Delight at your presence wears off and daily life takes over. Dad stops "lending" you money knowing he won't see it again. Those cherished shopping trips where you pick out the clothes and Mom picks up the tab are extinct. Extra-late nights out aren't overlooked so easily.

You also realize, as a reinstated member of the household, that your lifestyle is again under the same scrutiny as it was way back when. The only difference is the subject matter.

Instead of being bugged about your math homework, now it's your personal finances: "So, Blane, think you might balance your checkbook sometime this decade?" Curfews have faded away, but guilt increases tenfold at the sight of Mom, a groggy bundle of nerves, perched on the couch. ("I know you're a night owl, but when you live under my roof I just worry more!").

Your love life? Perhaps an even more disastrous topic than it was in earlier eras. Especially when your friends, siblings, relatives, and co-workers have long since happily married and are living in their own homes.

When you live on your own, such details go blissfully unnoticed, passed over in those weekly phone chats.

("Oops! Gotta go, Mom, there's another call coming in for my roommate!") When you live at home again, you're fair game for round-the-clock inquisitions (and conversations outside your earshot). I know my parents meant well, but sometimes I just wanted to remind them that I'd done just fine living on my own much of my adult life.

But parents are parents, regardless of the geography of the relationship. Whatever frustrations we experienced can't compare to my gratitude. The biggest evidence of this is in the bank, where I supplemented my account nicely thanks to nearly a year without having to pay for room and board.

The most important stuff, however, is immeasurable.

I grew quite attached to the quiet evenings with Mom while Dad was away on business, time she might otherwise have spent alone. I'll always be grateful I could pick Dad up from the airport after he returned from visiting his father in the hospital. The only ones home, we stayed up late, chuckling at "The Cosby Show" reruns. Those few hours were extra special for me because, during an incredibly difficult time in his life, Dad seemed to find a little pocket of happiness with me and Bill Cosby.

Several months ago, I moved out (again) from under my parents' roof. On my own in Atlanta, I'm re-embracing the privacy, freedom, and independence that I missed living at home. But the trade-off is the little things I came to take for granted: visiting with my dad during his lunch hour, having a drink with my mom on our dock, the three of us watching "The Sopranos."

And maybe, instead of cursing the dismal job market that kept me at home a little longer than I expected, I should say a prayer of thanks for the extra time and special moments I spent with two of my favorite people.

Thanks so much, Mom and Dad.

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