

Closer Than Ever
Penelope Young Andrade

I looked into my son's eyes and said, "Adam, maybe we need a break". He was startled. "What do you mean, Momma?" I replied, "Well, I either need more contact with you or less."

We were sitting in the lounge at the top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel in San Francisco on Sunday night. Adam had flown to SF for his step brother, Tony's 40th Birthday reunion weekend. In just an hour or so, I would be driving Adam to the airport in Oakland so he could fly back to the east coast. I dreaded our goodbye almost as much as I'd dreaded starting this difficult conversation.

Earlier that day Adam and I had made time for a hike through the John Muir Redwoods in Marin County. As we walked and opened our selves to those magnificent trees, we opened our hearts once again more fully to each other. Adam shared some of his longing to find work that truly mattered to him and to the planet. I shared my challenge to let go of trying to control my husband, Arturo's troubling health situation. I breathed in the rich forest air and the deliciousness of intimacy with my young adult son.

As best as I could, I kept my mind out of the future. I kept my focus on the late afternoon sunlight flickering through those sturdy, giant trees, the soft crunch of forest floor beneath our feet, and the joy of being together doing something we both loved. All too soon, if things stayed the same, I'd be facing a parched desert of brief, busy calls to a son who could barely find time for himself let alone his mother.

Our cross-country relationship was a strain for both of us. After undergraduate study at UCLA (a mere 2 hours from us in San Diego) and law school at Berkeley (same

time zone and just a short flight away) Adam had moved to Washington, DC a year earlier to begin work as a first year law associate at a prestigious law firm. He was also happily engaged to the woman of his dreams, Lorien.

Although I knew how many balls Adam was juggling and had great empathy for the powerful pressures in his life, I also knew that most of the time when we talked on the phone I felt more removed from him after each call than before. On the occasions when I told him I missed him, he seemed even farther away. This kind of dutiful but distant relationship was not working for me.

Many times after our calls ended I'd cry with frustration. Was this what letting go of grown up kids meant – going from close and related to distant and superficial? If so, this was terrible. My heart was aching. I knew separations were often hard for me because of my own early abandonment history. This particular separation was further spiked with the pain of an earlier loss when Adam went to live with his Dad at age 12. I didn't want to infuse my own issues into Adam's healthy life choices, but I didn't want to give up on our intimacy either. Worst of all, I didn't know what to do about it.

I began questioning other mothers I knew. Most mothers of sons hadn't had the kind of closeness Adam and I shared. Painful separation was not paramount as they were often relieved to be off duty when their boys finally left home. Some mothers of daughters could relate to the closeness, but hadn't experienced a similar break in intimacy due to geographic distance. Their young adult daughters were as eager as they were for yummy, reconnecting calls.

I felt like I was flying blind. How could I trust my longing, honor my need for authentic connection with my son, and still release Adam to his life? This was my quandary.

For the past year since Adam had moved to DC, I'd been doing the only thing I knew would help me find clarity -- walking deeper into the center of my experience. I asked my husband, Arturo, and several close women friends -- Shana, Lynn, Leila and Jan to be present with me on numerous occasions as I plumbed the depths of my feelings.

I faced my fury head on -- alternating between impotent rage and flattening grief. Waves of anguish pinned me to the metaphoric and literal floor (couch, bed). Stories of mother loss, father loss, brother loss, indeed lifetimes of loss swirled through my head as pain surged. I knew, though, from my life's work as a bodymind counselor that I had to keep my focus on my body, my sensations, and my emotions as I waited for these storms to subside.

Inevitably within minutes (and what a gift it is that the body is not neurotic and doesn't need to wallow in numbing narratives), I would find myself once again on the peaceful shores of spacious being. Here I could rest. Here I could see that I *could* let Adam go (and my mother, father, and brother as well). Here I could see that I would survive this parting. And, here, I could see the truth and beauty of my need for intimate relatedness with my child.

Of course I could let Adam go. I'd already done that before when he moved to spend school years with his Dad in Massachusetts. At that point, that was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I wasn't ready to stop being a mother to this extraordinary boy. I

wasn't ready to let go. And I did. As agonizing as it was for me, I intuitively knew that as he grew into manhood, he needed to be near his Dad.

I walked to the center of soul searing despair back then as well. I didn't, though, share the depths of my agony with Adam. Although we cried together many times in the months leading up to his departure, I kept my energy clear to support him in making this important move.

It was also true that our earlier separation was mitigated by *Adam's* ongoing need for contact with me. Back then he was vulnerable as he negotiated a whole new life as a young pre teen/teen. We'd had many long, intimate phone conversations during the six years he was on the East Coast. I had raised Adam, as a point of feminist honor, to be a boy who knew about feelings and processing relationship issues. Even though Adam no longer lived in California, our relationship still felt very close and connected.

As a matter of fact, when we explored Adam's feelings about moving to Massachusetts, he had said, "I want to go, Mom, but who's going to help me process my feelings?"

Now, it was different. I felt like I was being challenged to let go not only of Adam's physical presence, but of his emotional presence. Although Adam no longer needed me, I still needed him. At least, when we were in person to person or voice to voice contact, I needed to feel to feel that our connection was real and reciprocal. Keeping intimacy alive via telephone was vitally important to me now because that was our main mode of relating.

When the sadness about our physical separation rose in me during phone conversations with my grown up Adam, I wanted to feel that I could rest in our loving

connection for the minutes it would take for it to pass. Unfortunately whenever I said I felt sad now, I could feel a chill coming into the conversation. I couldn't feel Adam's heart.

As I continued to grapple with this dilemma, it became increasingly clear that I needed to take some action. If Adam had difficulty finding time for phone calls, I could let go of wanting regular contact. What I couldn't and wouldn't let go of, though, was my need for authentic, present, 'being together' time when we were talking on the phone. I wouldn't let go of wanting the sweet closeness of empathy and mutual regard with my beloved son.

Before I arrived in San Francisco for our reunion, I had decided that sometime during this weekend, I was going to tell Adam I'd rather not talk to him at all than make do with such unsatisfying calls. I was no longer willing for us each to rush through some pro forma list of current activities because he only had ten minutes to talk while he walked to the metro on his way to work.

I wanted Adam to know that it wasn't that I needed more quantity of contact with him, I needed more quality. I needed to feel he was happy to talk with me and could occasionally make the time to share deeper feelings. Even if this happened once a month, once a quarter or once a year, I would rather wait for a connection to be real and nourishing for us both, than to participate in the appearance of connection.

So there I was, looking into my beautiful boy's blue/gray eyes, telling him we might need to take a break from each other. This was hard. My hands were cold. My heart was pounding. I knew I was taking a risk and I was scared. Maybe I should back down, I thought. We'd had such a wonderful day; why not just let it be?

I took a breath and checked inside again, just to be sure. No, I couldn't do that. I couldn't face months and months of cold, cursory phone calls before we saw each other in person again. I was serious about this. I'd rather not talk to him at all.

I began to explain to Adam what it was like for me. I said, "It doesn't feel good when we talk and I can hear from the tone in your voice that you are not really into our conversation. It often seems like talking with me is an imposition for you."

I said, "I know this is hard for you because you're a young man taking on the world. Of course you're more interested in becoming a master of your universe than talking to your mother. I get it. That's healthy, but it is too painful for me to look forward to talking with you for weeks and then feel like you're not there, not present or available even for a twenty minute call. I'd rather take a break now and wait until you are interested in connecting with me again."

We paid our check and began walking down Nob hill back to our car. I continued talking. "The worst part of this for me, Adam, is that you don't seem to have empathy for how hard it is that I only get to see you three times per year if I'm lucky, and the rest of the time I have to make do with sporadic, distracted phone calls. Strangely enough, the fact that we always have such close, heartfelt times when we're together makes it harder to endure the disconnected calls when we're apart. "

Adam was quiet for a minute and then said, "Well, I guess I don't have empathy, Momma. I don't see why you can't just get over it. Kids grow up and move away. That's the way it is."

At this point I started sobbing. I barely noticed that we were still walking down that steep incline. I was grateful it was night and the street was virtually empty. I thanked

Adam for being so forthright with me and said “At least now I know what I’m up against. No wonder I can’t feel your heart if I mention missing you on the phone. You think I shouldn’t be sad.”

I had stopped crying by now and realized I was getting angry. I said, “It may be ‘normal’ for kids to move away from parents in the 21st century, but who says it’s healthy for families to live such far flung, fractured lives? We, humans, weren’t designed for jet set, digitalized living. Our nervous systems and psycho-bio-neurological programs were designed for close proximity with our kinship groups.”

My words rushed out in a torrent. I was finally able to speak my truth, to give voice to my despair about our inability to create intimate contact across the miles. “Adam,” I said, “Do you know how too many other families handle these kinds of distant lives? They start shutting down their hearts, trying to protect themselves from feeling the ongoing pain of separation. The rivers of love between them dwindle to trickles. Pretty soon loved ones become pictures on the refrigerator, rather than living relationships replete with all the sad, mad, scared and glad feelings love entails. I can’t do that. I won’t do that. I hate it that I get to see you, my beloved flesh and blood, maybe only fifteen out of 365 days each year.

I continued, “I don’t know what else to do about this pain except to be present with it when it arises. Even though in some brief moments this grief feels unbearable, I feel it, I breathe into it, I wait for it to pass. And thankfully it does pass.”

“Son, you know better than most that I don’t wallow in my grief. You can count on me to move through my feelings fast and get back to spacious peace. I know how to cry when I’m sad and stop when I’m done...usually in minutes. But I can not lie or

pretend my grief is not there, nor try to hide the waves of feelings that sometimes arise when I hear your preoccupied voice and face the reality of our separate lives.”

“I hope you also know I’m not trying to make you feel guilty by saying this. However, the reality is that you live three time zones and 3,000 miles away-- that our visits have to be big productions involving advance plans and airplanes, that I can’t see you for a simple lunch every now and then, that even phone calls have to be carefully timed and that intimate phone conversations are not your strong suit these days. You are my precious son, I love you more than life itself. If we are going to have a real relationship, I need to be able to share my feelings, however briefly, with you.”

We had finally reached the car and were now driving across the Oakland Bay Bridge to the airport. The air between us was electric and alive. Although we were on a tight schedule to get to the airport on time, Adam wanted to fit in a stop at an In and Out Burger stand so he could get a last fix of his favorite burgers before heading to the ‘In and Out-less’ east coast.

As we sat in the drive through waiting for a ‘Double Double’ burger to go, Adam turned to me and said, “You know momma, you say it’s okay with you that I moved to DC, but you don’t act like it.” Now it was my turn to be silent. I looked deep inside for my honest reaction. I wanted to be as forthright with Adam as he had been with me.

It was true I hated that Adam had decided to move across the country. However, I knew that he was really happy at his law firm. I also knew that I’d had the pleasure of his proximity during his years at UCLA and the ease of being in the same state and time zone for his years at Berkeley. I realized that Adam and his Dad, who still lived in Massachusetts, would now be able to experience some of that joy once again. I knew in

some cosmic sense, it was fair for him to be back on the east coast for awhile. I was glad Adam would have this proximity to his father, whom he adored.

I took a breath and said, “I want you to be happy, son. That’s the truth.” Adam paused and then said, “I believe that Mom. I know you do.” We sat in silence for a few moments. The energy between us now so sweet and so present, it was pouring into my soul.

I got out of the car to switch to the drivers seat so Adam could enjoy his burger in peace while I drove on to the airport. After a few moments of silence save for munching and moans of satisfaction, Adam turned to me and said. “I don’t want to take a break Momma. I want to stay connected with you. I’ll do better at finding time to be present with you on the phone. I love you Momma.”

I was crying again, this time tears of joy, as we reached the departure curb at Oakland International. I said, “Honey, I know how busy you are. If you can’t find time to call for a month or so. That’s okay. I can keep the memory of our love and connection alive until you are ready and able to be present with me.”

With that, Adam dashed out of the car and headed for DC. I drove back across the Bay Bridge, my mother heart filled with love and tenderness for my precious son. We were forging and fighting for bonds that would not be broken by miles, macho culture, youthful impatience, or maternal yearning.

As I write it is now three years later. I am happy to report that Adam and I are closer than ever. We have long schmoozy phone conversations every month or so that have lasted as long as 2 hours (rare) but often run about 1 hour. Adam has learned to settle into being present on the phone. We talk about what we are reading, about his and

Lorien's Bengal kittens, about his developing a new campaign finance reform practice for his law firm, about politics, about their house and garden projects, about their winning soccer team, his pro bono Surf Rider work, and his happy life with his wonderful wife.

We talk about my writing – book projects, poetry, and my monthly column. We share our delight about Arturo's ongoing health renaissance. We also talk about our inner life. We share deeply about our challenges and our personal and spiritual evolution.

I still hate it that Adam is 3,000 miles away (I'd now settle for him living anywhere west of the Rockies.) I still cry for a moment or two most phone conversations as my heart fills with the longing to be able to see and touch my son in person.

Although in a way I have 'gotten over it.' In another way, I'll never get over it. I have learned to open my self more eagerly to the big space formed by the absence of my son's physical proximity. Since even my step kids, Tony in NYC and Maria in Boise, are not local, I've expanded my view of family, collecting and enjoying bonus sons and daughters in California who are also separated from blood families. I have more time for my projects -- more time for me as a person rather than as a mother. My life is rich and full.

Even though to some extent this means I've gotten better at making lemonade, I have learned to appreciate a different form of connection with Adam . . . auditory, and yes, often digital, but still real and satisfying. The ways in which I'll never get over the pain of our living so far apart, are the ways in which my grief keeps my heart oiled, open and ready for deep, nourishing connection.

Adam has learned to be tender and supportive when sadness arises in our conversations. When I cry he says, "I know it's hard mom. I miss you too." He waits

with me gently for the grief to pass. In those moments when we are willing to face, feel and heal whatever pain might be present for either of us, time and space are irrelevant.

We couldn't be closer. © 9.02.08 (This essay is from the Anthology, *Fearless Nest*.)

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