

Kami Gilmour



Release My Grip

*Hope for a Parent's Heart as Kids
Leave the Nest and Learn to Fly*

“You’ve not only given me permission to grieve during this sacred season of letting go, you’ve given it purpose and filled the void with hope.” —*Rebecca H.*

“Thank you for putting into words what my heart has been saying for the past year. I will treasure this book for many years to come.” —*Karen S.*

“Beautifully written...hit the nail on the head! A relief to know I’m not alone and not the only crazy mom out there!” —*Debbie S.*

“Laughing...crying...tears running down my face! I’ve had to face the hard truth that letting go of my teenaged children is not easy. *Release My Grip* meets me in this difficult truth and ministers to my mama’s heart, reminding me (sometimes in laugh-out-loud ways) that God is walking right beside me in this crazy time.” —*Dawn C.*

“Oh my goodness—it’s as though God’s hand was in this. I just read this with tears flowing as my daughter is a college sophomore and I am STILL struggling with letting go. Thank you for your words. I feel so blessed to have found this guidance.” —*Jean M.*

“Thank you! As a mother of four teens (one in college and one in the midst of the college application process), this was a great reminder that we are not in this journey alone as parents or as students. As our roles shift along the path, God will be with us every step of the way.” —*Sue G.*

“This was the most perfect thing I’ve read as the weeks are coming too fast before my son leaves the nest!” —*Julie O.*

“When my kids left home I was totally unprepared for the ‘punch-in-the-gut’ feeling of deep loss that I experienced. *Release My Grip* has captured the highs and lows that nobody really talks about when your kids leave home. This should be mandatory reading for dads who have been ‘all in’ for fatherhood and want some heartfelt wisdom on how to process this enormous change as well as handle this next phase of life as a dad.” —*Jon V.*

“Wow, what a blessing to read this. I shed some tears, but I appreciate this glimpse into my future.” —*Alan H.*

“I keep forgetting suffering and love go hand and hand, and this helped me make sense of all of the emotions during this season of life. Great reminder of what Christ’s love for us looks like.” —*Cindy P.*

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ISBN: 978-1-4707-4847-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17

Printed in China.



Dedication

*To my kids—Faith, Chris, Paige, Nate, and Caleb—
for filling my nest through many seasons
and my heart forever. Fly high!*

*To my husband, Tim, for keeping me (mostly)
sane through it all. Cheers!*



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We tend to get stuck on
the “goodbye” part of the
story, grieving the image
of our kids leaving the
nest like it’s the final
chapter of parenthood.

B u t w e
forget that
our species
wasn’t born
with wings.



Introduction: *A Note From the Author*

I first discovered that I was poorly equipped for goodbyes when I was in the third grade and our teacher read our class the book *Charlotte's Web*.

It was such a great story...until the last chapter. My heart jerked up and down the emotional spectrum as Charlotte the spider dies, Wilbur (her BFF pig) faithfully tends to her egg sac, her babies arrive...and then most of the babies end up launching away into the warm spring breeze.

That was the point in the story where I totally lost it. I never even listened to the redemptive conclusion where three babies decide to stay behind; I was too devastated by the horrifying image of five hundred and eleven of Charlotte's babies wafting away and leaving poor Wilbur alone and heartbroken. It was too much grief to bear, and I laid my head down on my desk and sobbed.

Eventually my teacher called the school nurse to escort me out of the classroom because I continued to cry long after story hour was over. I remember the bewildered stares of my classmates as I left the room sniffing and hiccuping uncontrollably, wondering why I was the only one who was so traumatized by the departure of the beloved baby spiders.

More than three decades later, I vividly remembered my *Charlotte's Web* meltdown when I began to feel the pangs of overwhelming grief as my own children prepared to take flight out into the world.

And once again I wondered if I was the only person who experienced such deep heartache with letting go.

I felt alone. And crazy.

After all, it's not like kids growing up and leaving home is a new plot twist to the story of motherhood. I know how the story is supposed to end, and raising capable young adults was

always my goal. I had prided myself on my kids' ever-maturing independence, never hovering close enough to be a helicopter parent. I *wanted* them to spread their wings and launch into the world without me.

Or so I thought.

As soon as my daughter, Paige, scheduled her senior pictures the summer before her last year of high school, I began to feel the rumblings of my emotional unraveling.

Where had the time gone?

Wasn't kindergarten just yesterday?

How would I adjust to life without her at home?

I was filled with questions, fears, worries, and wonderings, but I didn't know how to process them. I wished I'd had close friends going through the same thing—or at least been able to find some sort of “postpartum support group” for mothers in transition between these teen and young adult years.

They have those postpartum groups for when we fill our nests; why not when nests empty? Hmmm.

I was terrified something was wrong with me for feeling such deep heartache when I was supposed to be happy.

In the absence of an outlet, I began to journal what was on my heart. And without a person to talk to who I thought would understand, I turned to God.

And something amazing happened.

The pain of this season became holy ground for my own transformational spiritual growth—a catalyst for deepening my relationship with God. *All by default.*

The journaling of my thoughts, fears, and grief became my lamentations—a composition of words from the depth of my soul that I needed to tell God but wasn't yet able to pray.

Writing through my experiences during the season of letting my kids go helped me make sense of things.

It revealed a sacred common thread of truth through each story, and I discovered that a deeper truth seemed to be underlying everything.

I started searching Scripture for more confirmation, and the more I dug in, the clearer God's Word became.

Do not be afraid.

You are not alone.

I am with you.

Trust me, I've got this.

Love never fails.

This is not the end of the story.

These words I heard for myself were the same words I needed to hear on behalf of my children.

Words that promised comfort, hope, peace...and even joy in this season of watching my kids leave the nest and wincing as they learned to fly on their own.

Those words remained the steady rock I could lean on through my kids' senior years, graduations, college drop-offs, and while navigating the ups and downs of their journeys through college.

And as I started to share my stories of learning and letting go on Lifetree's *SoulFeed* blog, I began to hear from thousands of other parents who echoed, "*Me, too.*"

As the blog audience grew into millions, I noticed that there are so many other parents who wanted to share their stories of releasing their grip on their growing children as well as reach out and tag friends to give them support on the journey.

To the sweet mom who emailed me the request to "please write a book" along with a picture of a folder containing printouts of blog posts that she'd compiled to help her endure the ride home after college drop-off...*this book is for you.*

And it's for *all* of you who are entering into or already enduring the season of letting go.

The transition our kids make from the teenage years into young adulthood is thrilling and terrifying and often completely perplexing for kids and their parents.

We tend to get stuck on the “goodbye” part of the story, grieving our kids leaving the nest like it's the final chapter of parenthood. But we forget that our species wasn't born with wings. Kids don't exactly launch into the air and fly away forever.

The more accurate picture often looks like this: They sail off on a breeze until they crash into something or the reality of gravity overtakes them, and then they end up on the ground squawking and flopping around awkwardly for a few years until they get their bearings and figure out which direction is up.

Trust me, it usually takes a while. Leaving the nest doesn't happen in a day; it takes place over a season of years. But it's real, it's messy, and it's normal. And if you're struggling (or your kids are struggling) during this time, it doesn't mean you've failed as a parent.

The stories in this book are a collection of “aha” moments I journaled while standing knee-deep in the season of releasing my grip as my daughter left the nest followed by my son a few years later.

I hope the experiences I'm sharing with you offer encouragement, hope, and the wisdom learned in hindsight. (And if you're feeling like an imperfect mother, at least you'll realize you've got company!)

Following many chapters, you'll also find a devotional section with relevant Scripture passages and reflection questions along with journaling space. They're there so you can process and record your own experiences on your journey and draw closer to God with renewed strength.

And I hope you'll hang on to this book to reflect on what you've written after you've walked the path awhile...it might become a treasured keepsake to remind you how God showed up in this season of life.

It turns out we *can* get through this.

We're not crazy, and we're certainly not alone. We're all in this together.

But just in case you're not convinced, feel free to take the quiz "18 Signs Your Kid Is Graduating and Leaving the Nest and You're Totally Losing It" in the next section to confirm that you are part of this tribe of parents who are on the same path.





Quiz:

18 Signs Your Kid Is Graduating and Leaving the Nest and You're Totally Losing It

If you're like me, you never paid much attention to senior year hoopla until you realized that *this* is the year that will adorn your child's tassel charm on their high school graduation cap.

Now that you've accepted the reality, you're probably wandering around in a complex emotional state that ranges from pride to panic. And all the while you're utterly perplexed by how fast the time has gone by.

Hang in there—you're not alone, and you're not crazy.

But in case you're not convinced, here's a checklist of 18 common traits that mark every parent's journey through the temporary insanity during this season of life from senior year to college drop-off.

- ☐ 1. You've turned into mom-parazzi—obsessed with taking photos and videos of your child throughout senior year because you're haunted by the fact that you haven't actually completed a photo album since their first year of life.
- ☐ 2. You suddenly feel guilty for EVER missing one of their sporting events and have vowed to attend EVERY SINGLE game this spring—even the “away” games. (Even the very far away games.)
- ☐ 3. You contemplate setting things on fire while trying to navigate the online FAFSA process (a.k.a. the eighth circle of hell).

- ☐ 4. You're fanatically savoring their "lasts"—their last Easter at home, last prom, last practice, last game, last band concert, and their last awards banquet.
- ☐ 5. There's a box of graduation announcements sitting on the dining room table, but You. Can't. Even. Go. There.
- ☐ 6. You've become that person who wistfully advises parents of young children to enjoy every moment because it goes by so very, very fast.
- ☐ 7. You stare at the atrocity of their bedroom, deeply concerned for their lack of laundry competence but secretly thrilled that they'll soon have to face this challenge on their own.
- ☐ 8. You start panicking and make a list of essential life skills you still need to teach them.
- ☐ 9. You torment yourself by starting a mental countdown of the weeks and days until they leave as if it's an execution date or something equally grim.
- ☐ 10. You get super-clingy and follow your kid around the house, asking to hang out every waking moment of the day.
- ☐ 11. You find yourself lurking in a dark corner of their bedroom, watching them sleep.
- ☐ 12. You take some stealth measurements of their bedroom and wonder how long you need to wait after they leave before it's OK to turn it into a home gym.
- ☐ 13. You find that random things make you burst into tears: childhood photos, a stack of empty boxes and packing tape outside their room, their dirty cereal bowl left on the counter...the first glance at their tuition bill.

- ☐ 14. You stalk your kid's future college roommate on social media, trying to determine if there's any possibility this space-sharing stranger could be a sex-crazed, shoplifting, nocturnal, meth-cooking psychopath with poor hygiene or bad study habits.
- ☐ 15. Your nesting instinct goes into overdrive, and you realize you've spent more on dorm room essentials than on an entire semester of college room and board.
- ☐ 16. You appear somewhat unstable while emphatically trying to convince your eye-rolling college student that they will certainly need such dorm essentials as a day planner, umbrella, rain boots, sewing kit, and that armchair-backrest pillow thingy that's existed for three decades.
- ☐ 17. You go through an entire box of tissues one night while looking through decades of old photos—including ones from your own college days—and wonder how all of these glorious years went by so fast and how you could possibly be this old.
- ☐ 18. You suddenly realize the age you somehow thought you still were is the age your kid has now become.

If you checked four or more of the signs from the list, welcome to the club. You're finally beginning to embrace the journey of truly letting them go.

And though it may feel as if sending your young adult off to college or out into the world is the final curtain call of parenthood, I promise you that it's not.

This time is not just about a season that's ending; it's about a new season that's just beginning.

For them, and for you as well.

Just keep reminding yourself that, for everyone, the best is yet to come.





Part 1: *Leaving the Nest*

“Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions” Deuteronomy 32:11. (ESV)

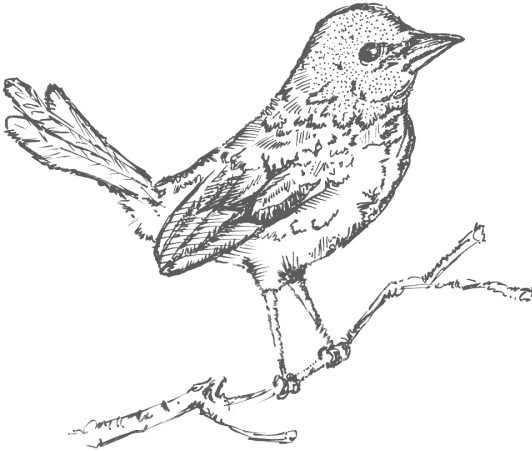
Lord, please
give me the
strength

to celebrate this
milestone without ugly
crying during
graduation.

I'd prefer not to show up
in family photos of this
special day with a
streaky/red/puffy/
post-meltdown face.



Chapter 1



Give Me the Strength: A Parent's Prayer at Graduation

Spring 2016

Lord, have mercy.

There's a cap and gown hanging in my son's room, and it's taking my breath away.

He's graduating soon, and I can't believe how fast the time has gone. Did you maybe spin the earth a little faster on its axis for the past several years?

He's ready...but I'm not sure if I am.

Because since the day he was born and wrapped his tiny fingers around mine, my heart has been living outside of my body. At that moment I understood the concept of unconditional love—including your love.

Thank you for making me his mom...and trusting my hands to care for this little human's life when I had no clue what I was doing.

This parenting journey has been the hardest, funniest, stinkiest, most terrifying, inspiring, holy mess...and there are a lot of parts I messed up that I wish I could do over.

Please forgive me for the times I was exhausted and bitter and wanted to give up. Forgive me for yelling a lot. Forgive me for not paying attention. Forgive me for forgetting things. Forgive me for dropping off my 6-year-old son and leaving him unsupervised for three hours at the sketchy roller rink because I had the date wrong for his friend's birthday party. Forgive me for all of the mistakes I made as his mom.

And please help him forget this stuff—or at least help him forgive me if my failures screwed him up. Hopefully you can turn the consequences into something positive—like the development of grit and resilience.

Thank you for the sweet moments, too—there were so many of those. The baby snuggles, the funny toddler sayings, the little boy hugs, the sloppy Mother's Day craft gifts and Popsicle-stick Christmas ornaments that I can't ever throw away, the hoopla of snow days, the sight of 10 pairs of sneakers in the doorway and the house packed with friends, the camaraderie of other parents on the sidelines of at least a thousand soccer and baseball games, the family road trips, the conversations around the

dinner table, and sitting on his bed whenever I still remember to tuck him in at night...this is what I'll miss.

But most of all, I'm going to miss him in the ordinariness of the everyday. Because being by his side and watching him grow up for the past 18 years—on the good days and the bad—has been the greatest joy and privilege of my life.

Oh Lord, release my grip and give me the courage to let him go. (You're gonna have to pry my fingers back a little.)

Remind me that he is yours...that he's always been yours.

Remind me that you'll be with him, especially when he feels alone.

Remind me that your love for him is even bigger than mine.

Remind me that I've done my best to raise a young man who follows you.

Remind me that letting him go is a much better alternative to letting him live in my basement forever.

And while you're at it, please remind him of all of the above, too.

Lastly, Lord, please give me the strength to celebrate this milestone without ugly crying during graduation. I'd prefer not to show up in family photos of this special day with a streaky/red/puffy/post-meltdown face.

Because I want him to know that I'm more proud than sad. I want him to know that I'm more excited about what's next than afraid. I want him to know that I believe in him.

And I want him to know that I believe in you.

Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayer.

P.S. Please keep the rain away during our graduation open house celebration, because I forgot to rent a tent and 150+ people are just not going to fit inside our home.



Digging Deeper—Devotions and Journaling

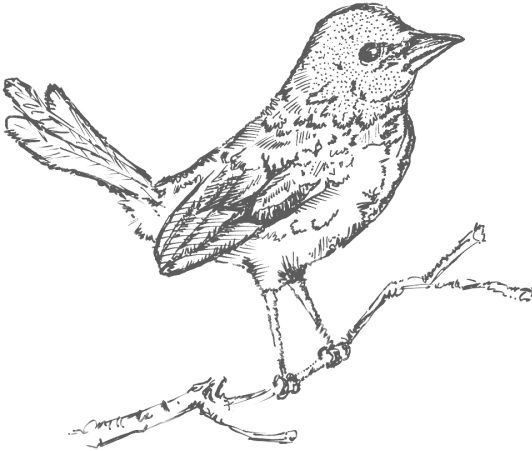
Find a quiet place where you can relax and listen to what Jesus has to say to you.

If you're experiencing the emotions of graduation season, what words do you have for God? Journal your own prayer here.

I've realized the
secret to surviving my
kids leaving
the nest
is to be fully present
to support them and
look forward to the
future through the
lens of their life, not
backward through the
lens of my life.



Chapter 2



For Everything There Is a Season

“...and a time to every purpose under heaven.”

Spring 2013 and Spring 2016

When my daughter, Paige, entered her senior year of high school, I was a complete train wreck.

Seriously: I. Was. Not. OK.

I couldn't fathom how the years had slipped away so quickly and we were already approaching this huge milestone.

I desperately wanted time to slow down to delay the inevitable "last-time moments."

I wandered through her entire senior year with tear-fogged eyes, paralyzed by grief at the thought of letting her go. I even quit my job so I could try to make up for all of the moments I'd missed.

Nostalgia was my nemesis, and I was tormented by my constant reflection of the past.

Memories of my daughter growing up repeated in my head like clips from a sappy movie, culminating in visions of the farewell scene as we dropped her off at college. *Would we be in her dorm room? Would we be driving away watching her in the rearview mirror as she waved from the residence hall steps? Would she cry? Would her dad cry? Would I even be able to breathe?*

So I cried through Paige's entire senior year. And then I ugly cried through graduation, during her college orientation that summer, in the checkout line at Target when we bought things for her dorm, and as we packed up her boxes and loaded the car.

And when the moment I'd been dreading finally arrived, I ugly cried so hard as I hugged her one last time in the parking lot of her quad and said goodbye.

Of course I also cried the whole way home...and every time I walked by her empty bedroom for a few weeks after she'd left.

But gradually the crying ceased.

That day of letting go had come and gone, and I had survived.

But more importantly, my daughter had survived leaving home, and she was thriving in college. She loved her new friends, her classes, the campus life, and the freedom of this new season.

Fast forward several years to now—she's a junior in college and studying abroad next semester, and soon her brother will

be graduating from high school and heading off to college in the fall.

And here's the shocker: I'm not having a full-blown nuclear meltdown this time. (At least not yet.)

I've realized the secret to surviving my kids leaving the nest is to be fully present to support them and look forward to the future through the lens of their life, not backward through the lens of my life.

I'd been so preoccupied by the suffocating vice grip of mama-mourning what I was "losing" that I hadn't paid much attention to how exciting this new phase of life was going to be for her.

Truth? This season is about them—not about me. (OK, everything with my kids is still a little bit about me, but it's not *my* spotlight.)

Watching my daughter grow into the amazing young woman she's becoming during college has been a true joy. She's had ups and downs during these years, but it's been evident how her independence has helped her grow into her true self.

Remembering this helps me come back to what is real and what is now—and find relief in being present in this sweet season of her young adult life as I put my trust in God's plans for her future.

I'm not beating myself up for feeling the pains of letting go—because they are real and it is hard to embrace this transition. I will never make it through these times without some breakdowns. But I don't want my tears to overshadow milestones that deserve to be celebrated with joy and pride.

And now it's my son's turn.

As Nate's high school graduation and college departure looms ahead on the calendar, I refuse to torment myself with visions of our last goodbye when we drop him off at his dorm.

And I refuse to twist the memories of his chubby toddler hands cupping my face as he professed his love for me "to the moon and back" into a motherhood meltdown where I am stuck in grief, longing for days gone by.

I love him, I believe in him, and I'm excited for him—so this time around I'll focus my heart on savoring the details of those last few months with him as well as visions of him thriving in college and growing into a wonderful adult I can't wait to get to know better.

As Nate leaves the nest, letting go of him will be tough. But he'll be back. And then he'll leave again. And again. This season of young adulthood will adopt a new normal with the rhythm of coming and going.

What I know for sure as a veteran mother of a graduating kid is this simple truth: *The finish line is just a myth.*

Parenthood is a lifelong journey—and it's also a lifelong (often painful) practice of letting one season go as a new season begins.

It begins postpartum and doesn't end on our kid's 18th birthday...or their high school graduation...or when they leave for college...or when they graduate from college...or when they get married...or even when they become parents themselves.

Parenthood will never be over, and God will never be done with them.

It'll just be a different season.

And I want to be present for it.



Digging Deeper—Devotions and Journaling

Find a quiet place where you can relax and listen to what Jesus has to say to you about clinging to the past as a new season begins for your child.

As you look back on your past, read and reflect on the following Bible verses:

“But forget all that—it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland” Isaiah 43:18-19. (NLT)

“Don’t long for ‘the good old days.’ This is not wise” Ecclesiastes 7:10. (NLT)

Ask Jesus the following question (even if you think you know the answer), and journal his response to you: ***What moments from my past are stealing the peace of my present?***

As you consider your future, read and reflect on the following verses from the Bible:

“How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone” James 4:14. (NLT)

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” Jeremiah 29:11. (NIV)

Create two lists, one for “Fears” and the other for “Hopes.”

Journal everything that comes to mind as you consider these two questions:

- *What are your fears about the future—for yourself, and for your family?*

[illegible]

- *What are your hopes and dreams about the future—for yourself, and for your family?*

As you consider your present—this time of letting go—read and reflect on the following passage from the Bible:

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

*a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,*

*a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,*

*a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace”*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. (NIV)

Ask Jesus the following question (even if you think you know the answer), and journal what he reveals: ***Who or what needs my attention in this present season of life?***

Up for a Challenge?

Look over what you've written about your past...future...and present. Spend time in prayer asking Jesus to reveal his perfect peace in your present situation as you surrender your burdens from the past and trust him with your fears about the future.

The finish line is just a myth.

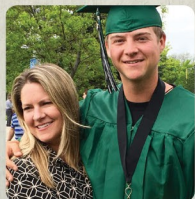
*Parenthood isn't over after kids leave the nest...
it's just a new season.*

Saying goodbye to children as they leave the nest and learn to fly ushers parents into an emotional time of grief, joy, and nostalgia. *Release My Grip: Hope for a Parent's Heart as Kids Leave the Nest and Learn to Fly*, by popular blogger Kami Gilmour, offers inspiration and practical insight as she reveals the surprising truth she learned while knee-deep in this sacred season of parenthood. Often humorous and always honest and hope-filled, these stories have equipped and encouraged the hearts of millions on the *SoulFeed* blog.

In this keepsake book you'll discover how this time can be fertile ground for deepening your relationship with Jesus. You'll also gain the practical tools you need to help you pause, reflect, and capture the words on your heart during your own unique journey as a parent of a young adult fledgling—from high school graduation through the years that follow.

With every chapter of *Release My Grip*, you'll find:

- **Compelling reflection questions** that draw you into the peace of God's presence.
- **Relevant Scriptures to ponder**—words that reveal God's heart, bringing relief and hope in the midst of wondering and worrying.
- **Practical challenges** to help you adjust to the rhythm of life's "new normal" and maintain meaningful connection with your young adult child.
- **Journaling space** that makes it easy to capture your letting-go journey as it unfolds.



Kami Gilmour is a popular writer for the *SoulFeed* blog, co-host of *They Say* podcast, and co-creator of *SoulFeed* college care packages. As a mother of three and stepmother of two teenage and young adult kids, she is a seasoned veteran of "letting go." She and her husband, Tim, live in Colorado and enjoy all things "mountain-y."



mylifetree.com | Printed in China

ISBN 978-1-4707-4847-0 USD \$12.99



9 781470 748470

RELIGION/Christian Life/Inspirational