Bob: There was a moment in Susan Yates' life when, as she looked at her empty nest, she started to think, "What's my purpose anymore?"

Susan: I remember the day after Libby's wedding—she was the last to marry—going up to the girls' room that they'd grown up in / that they had shared their whole life. As I stood in the room, I looked around at the walls, and there were lines where the pictures had hung. There were pieces of little scraps of paper and, as I looked at these bare walls, I noticed that the closet door was ajar.

On the floor of the closet I saw a rumpled, old, blue prom dress. It seemed out of place—it was all alone / it was not needed any more. It, in a way, was out of style. As I looked at that prom dress, I thought, "That's just how I feel."

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, August 1st. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll look today at the realities that begin to set in as the nest starts to empty out. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Monday edition. I'm just sitting here, doing the math. What's it been? It's been more than a decade, now, since you guys became empty nesters?

Barbara: That's right. [Laughter] Are you going to—

Bob: Are you still trying to figure it out? [Laughter] You're kind of silent there!

Dennis: I told you—

Barbara: I guess I'm a little slow on the math. [Laughter]

Dennis: No; that's not so. No; I'm just trying to realize when it was when you and I finally determined we were empty nesters. [Laughter]

Bob: So there was this process, you're saying?
Dennis: I think there was. I think it took us two or three years to come out of—how many years of childbearing and child rearing?

Barbara: I don't know—a lot.

Dennis: Twenty-eight, I think.

Barbara: I think so.

Dennis: I think over twenty-eight years.

Barbara: I think so. It doesn't happen automatically.

Dennis: No; I mean, it was—

Barbara: It was a transition.

Dennis: It was all “Hands on deck!” raising children. It took us awhile to get out of the mindset and to finally realize: “You know what? We can kind of enjoy each other now and focus on one another.” It hadn’t been that we weren’t doing that before; but when you’re tending to children, there’s no question—they drain you.

Bob: Our listeners are obviously aware that your wife, Barbara Rainey, is joining us today. Good to have you here.

Barbara: Thank you, Bob.

Bob: We are going to be hearing a message that you and your friend, Susan Yates, did, talking about empty nest issues. But I need to start by saying we got a very nice note from one of our FamilyLife Today donors, who wrote to say: “I’ve been reading Barbara’s empty nest book. I was encouraged to hear about your daughter, who rebelled, to find out that we are not alone. Barbara is so right—we just need to choose our words carefully and to pray, pray, pray. God is faithful and He cares about our children more than we do. Thank you.”

I imagine you’ve heard from a lot of folks, who have read the book, who have written you personally to say, “Thanks for capturing in this book what we’ve been living through and couldn’t put words to.”

Barbara: Yes; we’ve had great feedback from women who’ve read the book because they understand, by reading it, that we get it—because we’ve been there and we’ve felt those things—and we’re trying to help them know that they’re not alone.

Dennis: When Barbara and Susan wrote the book, they didn’t offer a “pie in the sky” type of picture of the empty nest. They painted it—flaws, blemishes, warts, and all—
because it’s a process that isn’t necessarily neat and tidy as you raise children who become adults.

What this lady is referring to there, Bob, is—she just appreciates somebody being authentic and real. I just want to say to this donor / this partner in ministry: “Thank you for being a part of this ministry.” You know, I was thinking, when you read that Bob—that David, when he went to war, had his mighty men.

Bob: Right.

Dennis: Well, we have a group that supports this broadcast and the ministries of FamilyLife. They’re not just mighty men—they’re mighty men and mighty women.

Barbara: Yes.

Dennis: And they’re mighty because they care about, I believe, the oldest institution in the world / the most powerful institution in the world. They’re investing in a ministry that’s bringing good to marriages and families and bringing hope to people in a culture that, frankly, is trying to undermine and do evil to families. I just want to say, “Thanks,” to those of you who are donors to FamilyLife—you’re needed, you’re appreciated, and God bless you and your legacy.

Bob: Yes; I agree—“Thanks.”

Barbara, you and your co-author, Susan Yates, had an opportunity to speak to a number of women—I think it was in Dallas; right?

Barbara: That’s right.

Bob: You spoke on the subject of the empty nest. This was a number of months ago, but we’re going to give our listeners an opportunity to hear what you and Susan shared with those women. We’ll just dive right in. Here are Barbara Rainey and Susan Yates, talking about the issues women face as they face the empty nest.

[Recording]

Barbara: Susan and I have discovered, on this journey, that all of us are asking the same questions. They boil down to four questions. The first one is: “Am I the only one who feels this way?” I remember thinking that and feeling that, after my youngest left. It’s a very common emotion for us in the empty nest. Most empty nesters feel that they are the only one.

One of the big ones for us / for both of us was loneliness—because the house is empty and it’s quiet. We’re not used to that.
Susan: Well, one of the things that we have found in talking to many women is that this season is very complex, and it’s really diverse—it’s just plain messy! You know, when we were mothers of young children, we went through many of the similar challenges—learning to share, back-talk, potty training—but it had sort of a beginning and an ending. Then as we hit the teen years, we went through similar challenges; but you get to the empty nest, and it’s just messier. It hits us at different times—it hit both Barbara and me at different times.

I remember when it hit me—I have a vivid picture. Our kids all married young. They graduated from college in a period of seven years, and most of them got married right after college. So, I never had a chance to really adjust to the empty nest because, as our third child was graduating from high school to go off to the university, our first child was getting married within a one-week period of time. I was overwhelmed! So it wasn’t, for me, until our last daughter / one of the twins got married—our twins got married within six weeks of each other. So that was a crazy summer! [Laughter]

Barbara: And they’re girls! [Laughter]

Susan: Yes! I remember the day after Libby’s wedding—she was the last to marry—going up to the girls’ room that they’d grown up in / that they’d shared their whole life. Susie and her husband, who had been married for six weeks, were packing up the U-Haul® to empty everything else that was left in the room. As I stood in the room, I looked around at the walls; and there were lines where the pictures had hung. You know, there were pieces of little scraps of paper, but otherwise the room was bare. As that truck pulled out of the driveway, with my last child off to her new life, I just sort of dissolved into tears and crumpled on the floor.

As I looked at these bare walls, I noticed that the closet door was ajar. On the floor of the closet, I saw a rumpled, old, blue prom dress. It seemed out of place—it was all alone / it was not needed anymore—it, in a way, was out of style. As I looked at that prom dress, I thought: “That’s just how I feel. I’m not needed anymore. I’m a little out of style.” I remember just sobbing; and so, for me, that was a real “Oh, me! This really is the empty nest!” as all of my children were finally married.

Well, all of us will experience different things as we hit the empty nest. As Barbara and Dennis experienced the beginnings of the empty nest, they experienced it with some real heartache.

Barbara: Yes; we did. As we began the empty nest season, we were in a season of suffering as parents. One of our daughters chose to rebel—she became a prodigal. She rebelled in some pretty serious, life-altering ways. We had sort of been dealing with some of her issues through high school, and we were doing everything that we could think of to help her. It seemed like, at times, things were working; but when she hit her senior year, things really began to unravel.
We found ourselves in a really difficult season as that year progressed. She was involved with an eating disorder, and she began to experiment with alcohol and drugs. Our life, as a family, just began to spiral—it really affected us and our marriage. Here we are—entering or approaching the empty nest—we weren’t there yet, but this was the way we entered our empty nest.

We spent her senior year, watching other families do proms, and graduation ceremonies, and all these wonderful senior activities. We were wondering where our daughter was: “Where was she spending the night?” It was such a time of heartache and loss for us when it should be a joyous, wonderful season of life. We were in a very vulnerable place in our marriage and in our family because of this great suffering that we were experiencing.

We went through that season, and there were two things that were very important for us. One was a small group of friends—and it was just really a couple of couples, who stood with us and prayed for us, even when we didn’t know if they were praying—there were many times that we didn’t even see them—but they had committed to pray for us through this difficult time in our lives.

The second thing that really got me through that season of life was God’s Word. I remember I had the verse—James 1, verses 2-8—written out on a card. I taped that card to my steering wheel, and it must have been there for two or three months. When I would get in my car and something dramatic had happened or something was really weighing on my heart for my daughter, I remember driving down the street, saying that out loud, over and over again, because there was nothing else that I could hang onto. Nothing else seemed stable in my life except God’s Word. Those two things really got us through.

We’ve learned that the empty nest is a season of great change. And one of the most important things for navigating the season of the empty nest is friendships. We’ve learned a lot about friendships in the last few years as we’ve worked on this and how important it is for us, as women, to have some good friends who can stand with us in the journey.

**Susan:** One of the main things that we’ve found—as we’ve talked to other women and as we’ve been honest with each other—is how lonely we are. You know, for many of us, when we were mothers of young children, we were desperate to be with another mother of young children just so we could complete a sentence because we felt like our brain had fried. [Laughter] So we sought out other women, and we went to women’s groups, and MOPS groups, and had play dates.

But then what happens, often, is you hit those teen years. You find that you put your girlfriend relationships on hold a little bit because you want to savor those years with your teenagers. Well, in our book, we talk quite a bit about this. We also give several keys to how to begin to reconnect with other girlfriends—I’m going to give you three of
them. The first one is simply pray: “God, make me a good friend to others.” Ask God to lead you to one or two other women, who would become soul sisters / who would be of encouragement to you. And then, secondly, take the first step. Actually write down a list of three to five women that you would like to get to know at a deeper level. Call them up, ask them to go for a walk, or meet you at Starbucks for coffee.

A third key is simply to be persistent. So you didn’t really click with that girl you went for a walk with or you had a hard time sort of conversing at Starbucks—simply call up another one. Keep going! Keep taking the initiative. [Laughter] God, in time, will bring to you a good girlfriend. [Laughter] But it’s scary; isn’t it? It’s scary to take that first step.

Our first question is really to give us each a little bit of relief—our first question is: “Am I the only one who feels this way?” And the answer is: “Most definitely, ‘No!’”

Barbara: The second question that is on your outline is: “What is happening to my relationships?” You know, as we enter the empty nest—and we sort of have been feeling this as our kids become teenagers—but our relationships are changing. We’ve learned that our marriages are in different places. My marriage was very different as we approached the empty nest than it was when we began our marriage. We were two very different people after twenty-five / thirty years than we were when we started. So the key word for this is “renegotiate.”

All of us are going to have to renegotiate our relationships. First, our marriage has to be renegotiated and redefined. Secondly, our relationships with our kids have to be renegotiated and redefined because they are now becoming their own person.

Susan: You know, as Barbara mentioned, she and Dennis had adjustments as they went into this season. So did Johnny and I; but we have also discovered that most women do.

Barbara: Yes.

Susan: And that’s one of the big things we fear. I want to read to you just from two different scenarios that perhaps you can relate to from a chapter that we did on “How Do I Relate to My Husband Now?” These are two stories that are true.

Bess and Gary couldn’t wait for the empty nest. Raising their kids had been tough. They’d had different approaches to discipline, they had struggled on a tight budget, and they’d postponed many of their dreams in order to be with their kids. Now, the last one was leaving and they felt they’d done the best they could. Finally, they were about to be free from the daily stresses of parenting. They were excited! They couldn’t wait for it to be “just us” again.
Shelly’s situation was just the opposite—she poured her life into her kids—they had come first. Now, as the last child got ready to leave, she was scared / really scared: “I don’t even feel like I know my husband. I haven’t been alone with him since I was 26.

[Laughter]

“Our whole life has revolved around the kids. Now, what will we talk about at the dinner table? What will we do on weekends? I don’t even know if I have the energy left to put into this relationship, and I don’t know if I want to.”

Two very realistic pictures of what we face in this new season.

Well, as Johnny and I walked into the empty nest, I needed to be aware that I could put undue pressure on my husband. That’s one trap I could fall in. On the other end of the spectrum, I could easily fall into this trap: “Well, now that the children are gone, he’s just going to work longer at the office. He’s going to take on more projects. I’ll just get involved in more of the things I’m involved in. We’ll just get busier and busier, and we’ll pass in the night when it’s convenient.” I realized that was equally as dangerous because I could become emotionally disengaged, and that would only lead to isolation.

It was really helpful to me to recognize these two extremes—but you know—not only does our marriage need to be renegotiated, but also our relationship with our adult children is going to change. Picture with me, for a moment, a seesaw. You know how, when you were little, you get on a seesaw with a friend—and part of the fun of the seesaw was one of you had to move in, who was a little bit heavier, and the lighter one had to move out so you could balance in mid-air?

Keep that picture in mind for a minute because I think, as moms, we have two tendencies as we release our adult children. On one end of the seesaw is the helicopter parent, and on the other end of the seesaw is the hands-off parent. Now, the helicopter parent is the parent that is perhaps a little too involved with her child. She’s on the phone: “Did you get to class on time?” “What are you going to wear?” and “What are your plans for the weekend?” and “Oh, are you eating right?” and “Tell me who your friends are.” The child may be on the phone, throughout the day, dumping on mom, which gets mom all upset. Five minutes after the child has dumped, she’s fine; and mom is leveled for the rest of the day. [Laughter] It’s very easy for us to micro-manage our children from a distance. That’s the role of the helicopter parent.

The hands-off parent, on the other hand, is one that says: “Out of sight / out of mind,”—sort of: “I’ve raised this child to be independent. They need to know that I have confidence in them. I am not going to call them.” As a friend of mine, who just sent her first off to college this year, said, “We’re not allowed to call him for the first three weeks.”
Now, she is a chronic hands-off parent—doesn’t know his class schedule, doesn’t know who his friends are, and wants to give him space so that he can become his own man.

Let me quickly say that both the helicopter parent and the hands-off parent love their child / they want that child to be secure. So, in our book, we talk in greater detail about these two tendencies and give several practical helps on how you can seek to balance that seesaw.

So our first two questions are: “What is happening to me? Am I the only one who feels this way?” and secondly, “What is happening to my relationships?”

**Barbara:** Yes, there are two words that I want you to remember. The first one is, “intentional.” Become intentional in your marriage relationship and in key friendships. The second word that’s key is “flexible.” Become flexible in your relationship with your children because it’s changing. You need to adjust to what your child needs and to find out the best way to relate to your child. So become intentional and become flexible.

[Studio]

**Bob:** Well, we’ve been listening to Barbara Rainey and Susan Yates addressing a number of moms—most of whom either were just into the empty nest or headed in that direction. I imagine you saw a lot of heads nodding as you spoke that night. Do you remember that?

**Barbara:** Yes; we did. We got some great feedback. But the story that I remember the most was a young Asian woman, who came up. I could tell by looking at her she wasn’t an empty nester. I started talking to her, and she’s got three young kids. She said, “I wanted to come hear what you had to say and get your book because I want to understand what my mom’s going through.”

I was just so taken aback that this young woman cared enough about her mother to want to understand where her mother was in life. I was so impressed / I still am impressed that she was willing to do that because she was the only one in there who wasn’t an empty nester or about to be. Most of the women had teenagers or kids who were already gone—so I was impressed.

**Dennis:** I’ll never forget when we were meeting together with some of our friends—all ladies about the same age—and we asked them, “Okay, tell us the most important things—

**Barbara:** Oh, yes. We were about to go in the empty nest, and these women were all ahead of us—they and their husbands; yes.

**Dennis:** Yes; and there were these blank looks on their faces: “We haven’t talked about it.”
Barbara: “We haven’t learned anything.”

Dennis: “What do you mean you and Dennis are talking about it? What are you learning?” So it just points out the need that husbands and wives really need to own this and talk about it together.

Bob: In fact, at the end of each chapter in the book, you’ve got questions. One of the questions, at the end of Chapter 5, is: “Set aside a date to begin discussing your expectations of each other in this new season. Also, plan for some times of fun for just the two of you; and if you’re highly motivated, begin to talk together about your vision for the future—about what mission you might want to work on, as a couple.”

You really are, in this book—you and Susan together—mentoring women as they approach the onset of the empty nest and as they enter into those early years—because this is a significant life transition for somebody, who for at least / almost two decades, has been functioning in the role of mother. Now, that part of her job is about to change in a pretty dramatic way.

And we’ve got copies of the book, *Barbara and Susan’s Guide to the Empty Nest*, in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. If you know somebody who is about to enter that season—maybe it’s you or maybe the season is still a year or two in front of you—get a copy of this book. It will help you be spiritually and emotionally prepared for the empty nest when it arrives; and it will help you navigate this chapter of life if this is where you find yourself right now. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY—1-800-358-6329. That’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

Well, here at the start of a new month, we’ve got a couple of anniversaries we want to acknowledge. David and Tanisha Lawrence are celebrating their fifth anniversary today. They live in Lynn, Massachusetts. And we also want to say, “Happy anniversary!” to our friends, Terry and Cindy Fahy, who live in Los Angeles. Terry is the General Manager at KKLA in Los Angeles. He and Cindy have been married 35 years today, and they are alumni of the *Weekend to Remember®* marriage getaway. “Congratulations!” to the Fahys and to the Lawrences. We hope your day is a great day as you celebrate your anniversaries.

We think anniversaries are a big deal and that we ought to be celebrating longevity, and commitment, and faithfulness in a marriage relationship. We are the Proud Sponsor of Anniversaries™. In fact, last week, we celebrated our 40th anniversary as a ministry. We got staff and friends together and spent some time reflecting on God’s faithfulness over 40 years, as we have sought to provide practical biblical help and hope for marriages and families over the last four decades.
You know, we had a number of people, last week, who wished us a happy anniversary with an anniversary donation. In fact, I noticed a number of $40 donations came through last week, and that was encouraging to see. We want to say, “Thank you,” to those of you who have helped support the ministry over the years.

If you’d like to help with a donation today, we’d love to hear from you. If your donation is $100 or more, we have a thank-you gift we’d like to send you. It’s a set of three study guides from our Art of Marriage® Connect Series—all designed to help you, as a couple. You can go through these, as husband and wife; or you can get with other couples and engage with them in helping to build stronger, healthier marriages. Find out more when you give, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call to make a donation at 1-800-FL-TODAY. Or you can mail your donation to us at Family Life Today at PO Box 7111, Little Rock, AR; our zip code is 72223.

Now, tomorrow, we want to talk about why it’s important for a mom to maybe take a break when she reaches the empty nest—maybe a little season of rest there. We’ll talk about that tomorrow. I hope you can join us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

*FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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