

# NEW LESSON PLAN

As my daughter's freshman year of college loomed, I had to learn that letting her go would eventually bring us closer.

BY NANCY STAR

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIANO PONZI

**O**n the morning my older daughter is supposed to leave for a pre-orientation college bonding trip, she cannot find her wool hat. This, apparently, is my fault.

Her five-day stint working on an organic farm is part of Freshman Week. It is late August. The farm is in Connecticut. For reasons I do not understand, she really needs this hat.

"Where is it?" she asks as she looks.

I begin to worry. Did I tuck it somewhere safe, so it wouldn't get lost? It sounds like something I might do. I offer to help and immediately regret it. I am familiar with this mood.

"I'll find it," she tells me. She will no longer meet my eyes.

She bought the hat in late July, in New Hampshire, where we'd gone for a family vacation. We'd spent the prior week shopping for college supplies, an experience nothing like the one depicted on TV commercials, where wistful mothers smile gently as daughters fill supersized shopping carts with fun-looking gear. On our expeditions all the comforters were ugly. Wastebaskets were too big. I foolishly flagged towels and under-bed storage units, and her response was unwavering: No, and no, and aren't you listening? No.

We used to have fun shopping together, but not then. As I stood beside our empty cart I reminded myself how hard it is to shop for the person you are about to become.

Then in New Hampshire we tried again. This time she found something she liked—a wool hat—an actual item on the packing list for the organic farm. And it has gone missing.

At home, I empty shelves and uncover a lifetime of excellent hats. But she only wants the hat she cannot find. The temperature outside is nearing 90. The farm is two hours away. I do not think she will be at risk for frostbite.

But I say nothing.

It's time for her to go. Hatless, she hoists her duffel over her shoulder and clutches her tightly rolled sleeping bag in front of her like a shield. I try to hug her, but her equipment prevents me from coming within a foot of her body.

I say, Have fun. We'll see you on move-in day in less than a week. She nods and follows her father to the car.

Five days later we stand on her sun-drenched campus awaiting her return. We watch as other freshmen come back in packs. International bonders, hiker bonders, cross-cultural bonders. Everywhere, bonded freshmen huddle in groups, singing, calling out cheers, clinging, hugging. Disoriented families watch from a distance.

Finally, my daughter calls my husband's cell phone. She's back. The bonded organic farmers are slowly making their way to the quad. We see her, standing close to her eight new friends. All of them are ragged from lack of showers and sleep. And on every head, a bandana. I realize that was on the packing list too.

The wool hat turns up six months later, hiding, neatly folded, at the bottom of a suitcase. I hang it on a hook in my daughter's empty room among a Dumpster's worth of once-treasured objects, from old trophies to plastic jewelry.

Recalibration began on the morning after move-in day, as nervous parents gathered outside the freshman dorm gates to say our goodbyes. With a jolt we realized it: These gates opened with electronic keys that had not been issued to us. From now on we call, and, hat in hand, do the work of waiting to be let in. ●

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