

# USE TIME WISELY WHEN YOU BECOME EMPTY NESTERS

BY GARY THOMAS



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*Many options are open to couples whose kids have moved out. Here are some tips on how to use time wisely during the empty-nest years.*

After Emily Woods gave birth to her third child, she decided to home-school her children and give up her interior design career. She sold her design books, closed the business bank account and focused on her family.

When Chip and Joanna Gaines became household names, Emily and her husband, Doran, watched their TV show “Fixer Upper” religiously. Emily began missing the life she had left behind. She told Doran one evening, “I have this dream: When the kids are older and I can get back into interior design, I want to start a company called Woods Design House.”

Doran listened attentively but soon redirected the conversation. Later that day he went online, found that the domain name was available, bought it and even designed a rudimentary site. He also claimed handles for social media.

“I captured ‘Wood House Designs’ everywhere I could,” Doran told me.

On their next anniversary, Doran brought up Emily’s dream. He “wondered” aloud whether the URL would even be available, and then he said, “Why don’t I check?”

After opening a browser on his phone, he said, “Oh, I guess somebody already owns it.... *We do!*” And he showed her his phone.

Doran could not have given his wife a better gift that year.

## The promise of the empty-nest years

I like this man’s initiative. He appreciated the sacrifice his wife was making while the kids were young and planned for the day when he could help make her original dreams come true. That’s the promise of the empty-nest years: After devoting decades to raising kids, couples can refocus their attention on the dreams and passions that have long been put on hold.

In 1900, life expectancy at birth in the United States was just 47 years. Many people probably would have felt blessed to live long enough to even *become* empty nesters, and few could have hoped to [enjoy several decades as empty nesters](#).

Today a child born in the United States can be expected to live about 78 years. This extended lifespan gives married couples a chance at two lives: a life spent raising children and another life spent after the children are grown. How can you and your spouse make the most of your empty-nest lives?

## Use time to resurrect stalled dreams

As Doran and Emily discovered, some dreams need to be set aside as we parent; the empty-nest years offer an opportunity to pick them up again. When my wife, Lisa, and I reached the point where we knew – barring some unforeseen tragedy – that we were full-time empty nesters for good, I told Lisa: “You’ve sacrificed so much for this family. You were a heroic home-school teacher and the best kind of school mom when the kids entered public school. Now, whatever you think God is calling you to do, let’s do it. If you want to go back to school, if you want to start a business, if you want to vacation more or get more involved at church, I’ll support whatever you want.”

In our case, Lisa decided she wanted to work more with me. When the kids were young, she traveled with me about 10 percent of the time. Now, she's with me about 80 percent of the time. If it's a trip to New York or Florida, she's with me. If it's a short stop in Winnipeg during the winter, she's probably not. But it's her choice.

## Use time to reconnect

Perhaps even more important than what you *do* with your new time is what you *become* in your new time. The empty-nest years give you an opportunity to reconnect as a couple.

I've watched a lot of couples go through this stage of life, and I urge you to make defining your identity as a couple a top priority. If you don't choose to move toward each other right away, you may fill up the free time with independent pursuits instead of each other.

## Prioritize time together

Rather than asking, "What can *I* do with all this free time?" ask "What can *we* do?"

Admittedly, I'm able to work longer hours now but still prioritize time with my wife. With just one person to focus on, I'm more aware of how crucial it is for Lisa and me to connect meaningfully at the end of the day. There's a favorite walk we like to take in the evening, and there's time to talk on the porch. I've got to be candid — as a guy with a strong work ethic, it feels great to have more guilt-free hours to work and *still* have more quality time with my wife than I used to.

Lisa and I have found that moving toward each other instead of filling up the time with other things has made this one of the sweetest seasons of our marriage. We loved being active parents and wish we could have raised more kids. But now we're enjoying the renewed friendship and the freedom to reconnect.

On Saturday mornings, we typically visit one of Houston's top farmers markets. At first Lisa was surprised I kept tagging along, but the reason is simple: I want to start the weekend with her. I'd encourage every empty-nest couple to discover one or two of their spouse's natural passions and start joining in. Just try a shared activity without making a lifelong commitment. If it doesn't fit, try doing something else you both enjoy together. But make that initial investment. Think, *What can we do together?*

## Seek first

More than thinking about old dreams or new experiences, however, empty nesters should consider our Lord's call that tells us to "seek first the kingdom of God" ([Matthew 6:33](#)). Here's the marriage miracle I've seen when couples embrace joint ministry in the empty-nest years: new respect and appreciation for each other.

You think you know all about a person. You've been together for decades and it's easy to assume you've figured everything out; there's nothing more to share, nothing more to discover, nothing more to talk about. Ministry of any significant kind presents new challenges and brings out previously unseen abilities and passions. You see a side of yourself and each other that you never knew existed.

I have a friend who is a blogger, speaker and book author. Her husband got his dream job just three years before they became official empty nesters. As my friend's platform grew, she and her husband found it difficult to connect relationally. Her husband believes she has a vital and unique ministry, so he quit his job to work part time in their hometown, freeing up his schedule to travel with and support her. They came to the conclusion that they "don't need the money but do need the marriage."

The empty-nest years provide a wonderful opportunity to recalibrate and strengthen your marriage through shared mission. Whether you seek to become the sports-coaching couple, the Bible-study-leading couple or the local-school-mentors couple, using extra time for a divine purpose refuels marriage, passion, appreciation and fulfillment. It can revolutionize a marriage. You know you can't re-create the initial infatuation you felt 25 years ago, but you *can* create and re-create the even more powerful bond of purpose and spiritual mission.

## Many paths

These ideas for making the most of your empty-nest years aren't necessarily exclusive. You can resurrect paused dreams or share new activities and still double down on your work for God's kingdom. But if, as you discuss all the options with your spouse, you feel your heart rate spike at the mention of one of the ideas, go with that first. Which idea makes you spontaneously respond, "We need to do that"?

Because God's work is paramount, I hope that every empty-nest couple will eventually find their way to the last point, investing their time in a new or more focused mutual ministry.

The danger of using the empty-nest moniker is that it defines this season of our lives as devoid of something (i.e., "empty"). But once our kids are grown, our marriage isn't just empty of kids; it's full of promise for a new future if you use your time wisely.

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