



Margaret Evans, Editor

It's that time of year when I always feel like a space alien surrounded by earthlings. Or a foreigner who just woke up in a country where she doesn't speak the language. Or a Jane Austen character trapped in a Ray Bradbury novel. Or . . . well, you get the picture.

Yes, it's back-to-school time, and I am once again feeling estranged from the human race. All the *normal* humans, anyway.

When I say "normal humans," I mean those competent, together parents who are on board, on task, getting with the program, etc. etc. The ones who got their kids' school supplies early, filled out the paperwork on time, bought uniforms in late June – when there were still uniforms left to buy – and actually *like* the fact that their kids wear uniforms.

I'm talking about those casually shipshape adults who can sit in a back-to-school parents' meeting without feeling intimidated, overwhelmed, disoriented or slightly queasy. My child is in high school now, which means I've sat through plenty of these meetings, and if I had a dollar for each new acronym or buzzword I heard, failed to understand, then promptly forgot – only to be faced with learning new ones the following fall – I'd be a rich woman. Do they actually *try* to make edu-speak as robotic, mechanical and inhuman sounding as possible . . . or does it just turn out that way by accident?

I really shouldn't joke about this. It's no laughing matter. In fact, high school is where it all

becomes deadly, frighteningly serious... so my sense of estrangement is even more acute than usual.

But forget all the “rubrics” and “assessments” and “4/4 schedules” and such. Even the simple stuff gets to me. I find myself put off by the incessant talk of credits and GPAs and transcripts. And I know... I know... these are *good* things. *Necessary* things. They are the measures by which we track achievement . . . the way we know that learning is, indeed, afoot. But I would feel so much better if we talked more about the learning and less about the tracking. As a member of the No Child Left Behind generation, my daughter has been tested and charted and measured and tracked within an inch of her life –

*all her life*

– and we’ve both grown weary. Whether it’s MAP or PASS or Duke TIP or what have you, it always feels like a judgment, a pronouncement of worth – and not just hers, but mine.

Speaking of which . . . I never feel so parentally inept as I do during back-to-school time. I know what I’m supposed to do – nay, what I *have* to do – but my heart is never quite in it. So I waffle. I waver. And the older she gets, the more my child can see that I’m waffling and wavering. Now that the stakes have been raised yet again, I must get my waffling, wavering self under control.

I must prepare, once more, to be the strict enforcer. The homework harpy. The project police. If I think the assignment is silly, or that the work load is too heavy, I can’t let on. If she’s up ‘til midnight working – after hours of extra-curriculars (which look good on the transcript!) – I have to be supportive but firm. Even as I’m quietly cursing under my breath. Even though I just want to tuck my baby in and sing her a lullaby.

And grades. GPAs. Transcripts. I’m supposed to pretend that they’re profoundly important – that the value of her education can be measured in letters and numbers, pluses and minuses – even as I secretly long for a world without grades, a world less obsessed with measures and standards. Even as I dislike the system, I must help my child succeed in it. That’s quite a trick, and I haven’t yet mastered it. One day I’m assuring her that “grades aren’t that important, as long as you’re learning and growing” (which is what I truly believe), while the next day, I’m frantically badgering her about “bringing up that math grade,” because – dammit – we’ve got a system where grades really *are* that important.

Because . . . college. Of course I want her to go. She’s my child, and that’s what we do in our family. But even there, I have mixed emotions. Is college really the best choice anymore? It’s

outrageously expensive now, and some say it's not worth the investment. They say college is no guarantee you'll get a job. But here's how far "out there" this space alien is, earthlings: Deep down inside, I don't care. College was never about getting a job for *me*. (And look, I got one anyway! Sort of.) Why should my darling girl be burdened with such mundane worries? I want her to sit at the feet of brilliant professors and loll about under trees reading Yeats, feel her mind explode with new ideas and her heart burst with new friendships. But nobody seems to appreciate that stuff anymore. It's become . . . passé? For me, college was about getting a *life*.

As far as I can tell, everybody now thinks it's about getting a job. So again . . . estrangement. I have severe estrangement.

Next year, as a barely 15-year-old sophomore, my daughter will have to choose a "career track." (Actually, I think she has to choose it this year.) I like the idea of "tracks" – of letting students pursue their particular strengths and passions while leaving superfluous subjects behind. I just hope they don't feel stuck in those tracks . . . and I hope it's okay to "jump the track" if one of these students – these children – should have second thoughts. I'm not sure why we have to attach the word "career" to the track at this stage – it seems premature and a little daunting, especially for kids who have no idea what they want to be when they grow up – but what do I know? I am no education expert.

In fact, I should repeat that statement for emphasis: *I am no education expert*. I am just a mom. This is not a critical analysis of our public school system – in the US or South Carolina or Beaufort County – and should not be seen as one. These are merely the musings of one mother who has always felt slightly adrift in that system, mainly because she feels slightly adrift in the society it feeds into . . . the society that created it. A society that thrives on ambition and competition and "racing to the top" can be an unnerving place for those of us with gentler constitutions . . . those of us who have different ideas about success and happiness.

But, this is a new year and a new school and hope really does spring eternal. So I will cross my fingers, say a prayer, and send my child once more into the breach – with optimism, fortitude and an extra stash of #2 pencils in her backpack.

After all, you never know when the next standardized test will rear its ugly head.