

Milestone Highway

The past few weeks and the next few heading our way are full of milestones for our family, as they are for many others. It got me thinking - just what are milestones?

Why are they so important? Why do they elicit such a powerful emotional response from us?

Graduation

Though it certainly wasn't as monumental as a college or high school graduation, Collin graduated from preschool two weeks ago. He attended a program at our local high school which enabled teenagers to learn child development by teaching three and four-year-olds.

Collin's teacher and his "big kids" organized a special little graduation ceremony complete with caps, tassels, and tie-dye t-shirts. The graduating seniors shared their post-high school plans, most of which involved teaching or pediatric medicine.

The little kids shared their ambitions, too. Collin wants to be a farmer like his daddy. His friend Hunter, on the other hand, envisions himself a Ninja Turtle.

As we sat in the little chairs after the ceremony flipping through the scrapbook they'd made of the year, it made me sad to think that it would be the last time Collin would be in that room. He'd created an entire gallery's worth of art projects there.

He'd learned to write his name. He'd made friends he'd seen twice a week for nearly eight months; friends he may not see again.



Image via Flickr, heartcaves

We drove past the school the other day and Collin yelled, "Look, Mommy! There's my school!"

"That's your old school," I told him. "You graduated from there, remember? You will have a new school soon."

Graduations are tricky because not unlike being born, they involve an obligatory change of venue. We find ourselves forced to physically remove ourselves from an environment, despite how much it's come to feel like a home to us. We must leave that place when we have absorbed all the nourishment we can from it. Then, we find another place to establish ourselves - a place that has more to offer us; a place where we can grow.

Though he learned a great deal in his preschool program at the high school, Collin's time there was up. He will be attending a more intense five-day-a-week preschool program in the fall to prepare him for yet another milestone - kindergarten.

As for my own graduating seniors, I know that when we release them next week,

they are as ready as our school could make them for the “real world.” Teachers only have a semester, a year, or in some cases all four years to prepare our students for the future, and it tends to show up sooner than we expect . In establishing themselves in their new lives, they will find other mentors to guide them through challenges, but they’ll always know where to find us.

Birthdays

Frank turned one on Saturday. I could hardly believe it. Then I remembered that I have a milestone birthday of my own coming up in a couple of weeks. The thing about birthdays is that they don’t fit into our schedule when it’s convenient for us.

They aren’t polite. They’re uninvited guests that show up demanding our attention – and cake. But they’re worth celebrating for a very good reason.

When my cousin Katie was a little girl, she proudly told a neighbor that it was her mom’s birthday. “She’s thirty-six,” Katie boasted, “she made it!”

My aunt told me that that’s the way she has looked at her birthdays ever since.

Birthdays are about continued survival. And this is why the first birthday is especially significant.

Infancy is dangerous. There are so many risks to babies, whose immune systems are much weaker than ours, and who are defenseless without us. In most cases, at the first birthday the frail baby has begun the transition to a rough-and-tumble toddler, who eats real food, jibber-jabbers, and is on the move. It can feel like much more work when your little one is into everything (and believe me, Frank is), but this giant leap toward independence is worth celebrating.



Image via Flickr, mae.noelle

The day after Frank’s birthday, I told Patrick that I was a little sad that Frank turned one and that he wasn’t a little baby any more. (It didn’t help that I’d just finished watching Toy Story 3.

“I just want them to stay little,” I told Patrick. “And pretty soon, they’ll be in school, then college...”

“Milestones are about growth, and growth is a good thing,” Patrick told me. “And besides, you’ve got another one coming around.”

He meant, of course, Baby #3, due October 19th (I’m halfway there!), but he could have also been referring to my upcoming birthday. Entering a new decade is intimidating. I’ll be part of another demographic, but I’ll still be me. It will also offer me the opportunity to look back at the past decade and see how much I’ve changed. It will give me the chance to say, yet again, “I made it!” And there will be cake.

Anniversaries

When most people think of anniversaries, they think of marriage, but anniversaries

could be any yearly commemoration of an event -negative or positive.

On Sunday, I will be attending a vigil honoring a young man who took his own life a year ago. His funeral was the most painful one I've ever attended, and I'm not anticipating his anniversary vigil to be any easier. But, it's an important way to remember a beautiful life cut too short.

One week ago marked one year since a very close friend quit smoking. This friend has chosen to live healthier, eating right, exercising, and taking the time to have fun. It gladdens my heart to know that my friend is headed towards a long, happy life. I'd like to plan some sort of a special celebration to commemorate this anniversary, but I'm out of ideas and open to suggestions.

Lastly, my wedding anniversary is coming up, a week after my birthday. Patrick and I celebrate each anniversary by buying something for our house-or taking a trip to somewhere-based on the traditional anniversary gift for the corresponding year.

This year, we had planned on going to Austin, but decided to stay home after we discovered I was pregnant. So, we will celebrate with a trip to Wildwood, NJ, and stay at the same bed and breakfast as we did last year.

Going back to the same place will offer us the opportunity to compare the people we were the last time we visited to the people we are now. We've been through more than a few major upheavals since then, but - we made it.

Conclusion

No matter how much we want to slow down or speed up time, it is a constant over which we have no control. Milestones are those points of time when we are encouraged to briefly stop moving forward, stand still, look back, then look around, look forward, then go. We can ignore milestones or honor them when they occur with a celebration or remembrance. In giving attention to milestones, we are making an opportunity to acknowledge transitions, to congratulate accomplishments, to keep memories alive, and to celebrate growth. Growth is good, but it can be hard to take because it means change. Like time, though, change is constant, and something we cannot control.

Bottom line: We can't stop our babies from growing up, so we might as well celebrate each milestone along the way. After all, growth is good...and there's another one coming around.