

How to Parent an Adult Child from Afar

We were going away at the wrong time. That is what I felt in mid-2010, as my husband and I packed up our Minnesota belongings to move to Istanbul, Turkey. Our youngest, Greg, had just graduated from college. The Great Recession was not over, but Greg, a liberal arts grad with no real career direction, was going to try his luck in New York City.

I disliked leaving the country when my son was just starting out. He didn't need mothering, exactly, but I wanted to be closer than nine time zones away.

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My husband Sankar's job had precipitated this move, something my younger self would have relished. I had loved foreign travel in my twenties, even moving to Yemen to work as a health educator. In the nineties, we'd lived as a family in Costa Rica. But during the last decade I'd turned into a homebody. I gardened, enjoyed the latest films, and happily curled up with freelance editing. I met the Turkey news with reluctance.

It took some sharp words from my daughter, Angela, back in Minnesota for grad school, to make me reconsider. When I mentioned not wanting to interrupt my busy life, she commented, "Mom, all you do is sit on the couch, reading and watching Project Runway."

It was a rare glimpse of how my kids saw me. My life had become lackluster, I realized. Where was the adventurous woman I'd once been?

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A friend gave me a Turkey guidebook, and I flipped through photos of golden domes, intricate mosaics, and brilliant ceramics. I learned that many of my cultural references, from Aladdin to King Midas to tulips, originated in Turkey. I encountered words—Bosphorus, whirling dervish, Hellespont—that I'd known since childhood, but hadn't been quite sure what they meant. Intrigued, I agreed to make the move.

My wanderlust self still had a beating heart! But my thoughts lingered on Greg. He had bloomed in college, but he sometimes lacked confidence. Well, we'd both be adjusting to coastal mega-cities. New York, with 8 million people, and Istanbul, with 15 million. There was some symmetry in that.

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As summer began, Sankar and I settled into a two-story apartment high above the Bosphorus, and Greg began couch-surfing with his college friend, Jeremy, in midtown Manhattan. Sankar's job merited the services of a driver, but he seldom needed it, so a car, and a man named Ümit, appeared in front of our building every day, ready to take me wherever I wanted to go.

I cringed at the thought of having my own full-time employee. Americans, I felt, should tread lightly in other countries. Using a driver made me feel greedy, entitled.

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Greg was struggling in his new abode. His apartment mates, musicians, stayed up all night, jamming. I fretted, wondering how he could conduct a job hunt on just a few hours of sleep, his clothes stuffed in a crowded corner.

One morning he phoned to tell us he'd had a lengthy interview for a sales position. It sounded like the job was his, but when I asked later, he told me he hadn't even gotten a call-back. I regretted not pushing him toward summer internships while he was in college. Instead he had tutored language students from his St. Paul high school, dubbing his effort "Vamonos Spanish." I'd been proud of his creativity, but the job was hardly a resume showpiece.

He signed up with a temporary agency that sent him out to serve at banquets, not bad money. One weekend he got a bartending gig for a Time Magazine event in the Morgan Library. A longtime subscriber, I asked him what luminaries were present, but he had no idea.

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I began exploring my new city. Red-roofed Ottoman buildings perched on wooded hills that tumbled down to vast waterways. Suspension bridges, often obscured by mist, joined European Istanbul to its Asian counterpart. An ancient, horn-shaped peninsula held the Topkapi Palace, the sixth century Hagia Sophia, and even a 4th-century Egyptian obelisk.

I loved these sights, but I longed for companionship and purpose. Language classes and expatriate activities were shuttered for the summer, and Sankar was traveling—to Russia, the Persian Gulf, and Eastern Europe. Days stretched long and empty, filled with homesickness.

Thankfully, I had email and Facebook. They kept me connected to home, and I started a blog, calling it, *Sue's Turkish Adventures*.

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Greg's friend Jeremy had, with a classmate, written and produced a hit song. The pair was considering a contract with Warner Bros. Entertainment. "I waited for them outside a bank one afternoon while they picked up an \$80,000 royalty check," Greg recalls. "I was eating my dinner—a package of honey-roasted ham." In photos from that year, Greg looks about as thin as the slices. I felt guilty one evening when he phoned as we were dining on *levrek*, striped bass, with Sankar's colleagues.

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When fall arrived, I began Turkish lessons, signing up for a class slightly above my level. I had taken distance learning Turkish before leaving home, and even via headphones, my teacher had understood my rudimentary words. But my new teacher, Gülcan, seemed unable to do this, refusing with eye rolls to understand my stammered speech. I felt uncomfortable in class and my Turkish became even more hesitant. It was a disconcerting experience, and I was tempted to blame Sankar: see what you've gotten me into! But I resisted.

Sankar and I were amazed at the friendliness and generosity we were otherwise encountering. When they met us, Turks beamed, all but exclaiming, "A new person!" They hurried after us whenever we left behind

a sweater, bag, or even extra change in a shop or restaurant. When Angela visited, and her sandal fell apart outside an Istanbul mosque, an elderly male worshipper ran up to us and kindly pointed out a nearby shoe repair. We felt welcome in our new country.

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Greg took a job at Barney's in October, but then, against better judgment, told them he planned to be out of town Thanksgiving weekend. An hour later, he walked out onto Madison Avenue, unemployed. I felt sorry for him, but also exasperated.

One day Ümit, clearly disturbed by my tales of Greg couch surfing and bartending (Turks don't favor the "sink or swim" approach with their children), asked, 'Don't you *know* anyone in New York?'

My negative reply surprised him—and shattered his idea of Sankar and me as Very Important Americans.

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At a fall expatriate fair, I joined a group called The American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT), which offered sightseeing trips around the country. One Sunday, Sankar away, I joined ARIT on a tour of Istanbul's Seventh Hill. Guided by a professor of Turkish history, we peered at the ruins of St. John Studion, a 5th century hub of calligraphy and manuscript illumination that was dissolved after the 1453 conquest. We stood outside the barracks of the Janissaries, soldiers taken as boys from families throughout the Ottoman empire and turned into elite fighting forces. We sat on the richly carpeted floor of the Şehzade mosque as our guide told us it was built to commemorate the death of Sultan Suleiman's twenty-two-year-old eldest son from smallpox. Finally, we stopped by the Kalenderhane Mosque, formerly a Byzantine church, built on top of Roman baths, one regime replacing another.

All of these places spoke of loss and longing, putting my own travails into perspective. And on the tour, I met several Istanbul residents who were also feeling displaced. It was comforting.

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Each day, Sankar arrived home exhilarated, greeting me with a jaunty, "How's your day? What did you do?" Sometimes, it was all I could do to keep from snapping at him, and I decided I needed to try and find a job. With experience teaching freshman composition, I had English teaching in mind. But after a chance meeting with a retired English as a Second Language teacher, I realized there was a demand in Turkey for ESL teachers, and decided to pursue that avenue as well. Sankar's assistant, Beyza, kindly helped me write letters to universities, and several offered to interview me.

One afternoon, Ümit drove me forty minutes in heavy traffic to an interview at Kadir Has University. When the interviewer asked if I preferred teaching English or ESL, I should have hedged, but answered ESL.

"This is the *English* department," she replied, and ended the interview. Embarrassed at having come so far for a five-minute meeting, I hid out for a half-hour in a nearby bathroom before emerging to face Ümit.

Greg's friend Jeremy took the job with Warner, and that meant leaving his position with the City of New York. He recommended Greg to his boss, and Greg was taken on as an unpaid intern. He phoned us, exuberant, "Mom, I get to call vendors and explain a form to them!" I was pleased.

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I interviewed at a university called Özyeğin, which had several teachers departing mid-year. The head of ESL offered me a job and I signed a one-year contract. After a Christmas visit home in which I proudly proclaimed my employment (I hadn't worked full-time since 1987, and felt I was perceived as a bit of a screw-up), I started work. My class list was filled with baffling sounding names—Gamze, Özgür, Gökalp, Hande—and ESL would be completely new, but thankfully, I was given a structured curriculum.

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Before long, Greg's internship turned into a real job. Now we were both working in our new cities. With a regular paycheck, he signed a lease with college friends on a walkup in Murray Hill, east of midtown. I visited him on a teaching break. It was a neighborhood of tree-lined streets, bagel shops, bars, and casual cafes. "College 2.0," Greg remarked. We were both living in attractive surroundings, but Greg's room was so narrow he could squeeze little more than a bed into it.

His apartment mates were hosting a Super Bowl party that weekend. Libations were being brought in, and a half-hearted invitation was issued in my direction. I would have loved to attend, but it was a social opportunity for *them*, not me, so I watched the game in my hotel room.

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My job was turning out to be more challenging than I'd expected, my students inattentive and even unruly. Several talked and joked throughout each class period, paying no attention to my efforts to engage them. This was a surprise in an otherwise polite culture, and at first, I blamed my rookie status. But I soon learned that other colleagues had similar complaints.

I wondered what I'd gotten myself into, and even considered giving up. But I couldn't do that. I'd have to pay back a month's salary, and worse, I'd be discredited in the eyes of Beyza, Ümit, and others at Sankar's office.

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"I'm moving."

I took Greg's call one morning as Ümit drove me across the Bosphorus to work. Two of his apartment mates, he was telling me, had decided to relocate to buildings their families owned. My eyebrows went up at this Manhattan-style parenting.

Greg and his remaining roommate, Scott, needed to find a smaller place. And their landlord wasn't releasing the security deposit, so one of the dads, a lawyer, had taken it up.

The pair located a studio in a newer high-rise at Fulton and Water Street in FiDi, the financial district. Scott's father helped them construct a T-shaped, plywood partition, turning their small space into two tiny bedrooms and a nub of unlit living room. Then, to Greg's (and my) dismay, Scott decided to adopt a puppy.

I visited Greg shortly after he moved, and I felt like he had moved to a different city. Stern granite skyscrapers appeared to rise straight out of New York harbor. Ponderous shadows, hushed streets and the Merrill Lynch bull. An aura of seriousness that was fitting, if poignant, for two young men moving past college years and into long decades of work.

We visited Ground Zero and caught a foreign film in the Village. After hours, we stopped by Greg's workplace, The Mayor's Office of Contract Services. A data entry station sat adjacent to his half-cubicle and displayed photos of three middle-aged women who had become his work buddies. They shared snacks and office advice, and teased him about his bus trips to Boston to see his girlfriend. I felt grateful.

Greg and I were both waking up to new views, both getting lost on new streets. We were both assessing people to determine whether they could be friends. I was actually discovering two new cities. It seemed like some adventure button in my life had been suddenly set to *on*.

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Taking advice from my department head, I worked to turn around my classroom situation. Turkish students, she told me, expected personal connections with their teachers. In the subsequent term, I made sure to schedule individual conferences with each student early on, and that led to a more positive classroom atmosphere. I also discovered my students' love of games, and began turning as many lessons as possible into classroom competitions.

On good days—and despite reading a flurry of American newspaper articles describing how the Great Recession had ended job opportunities for fifty somethings—I began thinking of ESL as a career.

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One evening Greg called with a request. He wanted to enroll in an eight-week web design class at a school called General Assembly. Could we help him pay the \$3,500 tuition? I was skeptical. His college grades had been mediocre, and I wasn't convinced he was ready to be more diligent. He was insistent, however, so we agreed to lend him the money.

The results were surprising: he loved the course and extolled the teacher and curriculum, becoming one of those students who hangs around after class with extra questions. I was delighted that he was starting to find his way.

In fall of 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall in New York, and Water Street lived up to its name. The power failed in Greg's building and he and other tenants had to leave. If we'd been in the States, we would have sent Greg a ticket home, but instead he spent a week with a college friend in Philadelphia and then camped out with another friend on the Upper West Side. Fortunately, his landlord waived the month's rent.

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Sankar and I were increasingly aware of the fascinating sights scattered throughout Turkey, and we wanted to see as many of them as possible in our now-scant spare time. A trip with one of his colleagues took us to Antioch, in southern Turkey, where we climbed up to St Peter's Grotto, actually a cave, believed to be the first Christian church. We drove to nearby Şanlıurfa and relaxed alongside a 12th century reflecting pool dedicated to a native son, the Prophet Abraham.

When Greg and Angela came to visit, we drove to the Roman cities of Ephesus and Hierapolis. We spent an afternoon following the winding Menderes River, from whose name the word, meander, derives, and I was thrilled to show off *my* new world.

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“I’m moving again,” Greg announced. Scott was bailing out of their little studio, moving back to live with his parents on Long Island, and Greg couldn’t afford the place on his own. I was starting to see New York housing as a domino game, one move precipitating a series of others.

Greg was only earning in the mid-30s, but he was determined to find a place of his own. Via Craigslist, and thanks to the Murray Hill security deposit he’d finally received, he rented a room above a fish market on Grand Street and Bowery Avenue in Chinatown. The Bowery!

Greg remembers Chinatown as “artsy and dirty, smelly and random” and when I visited, I had to agree. His room was up two flights of stairs that looked like they’d never seen a mop, within an apartment full of shrouded furniture. Paint blistered off the walls and the sun struggled in through a tiny, dusty skylight.

We took a cab to IKEA in Brooklyn and I bought him a dresser. He was traveling light in New York, picking up odds-and-ends and then leaving them behind, but he had a little \$8 “Lack” IKEA table that had been following him. When I called him, I would ask, “How is Lack?”

Greg had broken up with his girlfriend, so no more Boston getaways. It was hard to think of Greg alone in that shabby room, but his solitude, like mine the year before, ended up sparking creativity. He also started blogging, first producing *Honest College* and then *Dear Blogger*.

My blog was thriving. I wrote a post about the Mosque at Ground Zero controversy, and enjoyed a robust number of likes. For the first time, I felt that my voice was being heard.

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At a bar just before Halloween, Greg met Clare, a pretty nurse from Brooklyn, and they began dating. Good news, as he confided he’d been lonely. And his blogs had begun to generate revenue. He’d worked for the city for two years when he called to say he was thinking of quitting.

“Greg! How can you give up a job with benefits?” was my alarmed response. But he went ahead and gave notice. He recalls walking to a Little Italy bakery for breakfast at 1 pm the day after he quit, “I felt so free of the rat race.”

I had once quit a high-paying job, not for another position, but to stay at home with baby Greg. I was no stranger to taking risks in pursuit of happiness, but I’d had the cushion of my husband’s income.

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One Saturday, Sankar and I joined an ARIT tour on a four-mile walk around Istanbul’s land walls. This long, fortified barrier, constructed in the 5th century CE, protected Constantinople for ten centuries. We gazed at triumphal gates where Byzantine emperors had entered their city, and peered at a section called the Circus Gate where Ottoman troops had finally breached the walls, capturing the prize they renamed Istanbul.

Throughout the tour, our guide told us, “It was the same people,” meaning that regime change, and even religious change, was borne, not by people brought in by the victors, but instead by long-term inhabitants who, sensing the direction the winds were blowing, adapted their beliefs and allegiance. His words made me see Istanbul’s history as a saga of adaptation and survival.

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Greg was moving up in the world—and once again he was planning to move. I figured he was glad to be leaving Chinatown, but his sublet ad was surprisingly tender: “This place was where it all started for me, and I want a special person to have it.”

He hired a rental agent who charged him a whopping \$4,450 to locate an efficiency in the Village. I was proud he could afford that but, not fully comprehending digital employment, feared his income might any day disappear into cyberspace.

Clare’s father drove into the city to help Greg move, exclaiming, “What the fuck?” when he saw Greg’s room.

He settled into a fourth-floor studio, a garret really, above several elegant apartments and a psychology practice. His street was charming, filled with winsome old townhomes and artisanal coffeehouses, and his 12 x 16 room was sweet, with old-fashioned mullioned windows, a tiny bath and a sliver of kitchen so small its drawers couldn’t fit a standard plastic utensil holder.

I felt like a hipster walking around the Village with Greg. We rubbed shoulders with artistic-looking patrons as we drank our morning coffees, peered into The Chess Forum, and shopped for houseplants alongside a Russian Orthodox church. His business was thriving, and he had adopted two kittens, Leroy and Snowy. For entertainment we laughed at their antics.

As I climbed into an Uber to leave, Greg surprised me by calling down from his attic room to say goodbye. I looked up, waved, and snapped a picture. I’m not sure whether it was the distance, or the angle, but when I looked at the photo later, I saw a grown man.


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Our tour in Turkey was coming to an end. Sankar had achieved his goals and I had discovered a new career. In addition, the two of us had uncovered a mutual interest in religious and ancient history. On our final ARIT trip, to Turkish Mesopotamia, we ate dinner under the stars, the honeyed hues of the ancient stone buildings bathing us in golden light as if to congratulate us for the leap of faith that had opened up our world.

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In 2017 Greg moved back to Minnesota with his cats, renting an apartment alongside a Minneapolis lake. He still makes his living blogging, but he and Clare have gone their own ways. I don’t worry; he’s an adult now, fully able to handle career, housing, and love life.

Greg’s New York journey was aided by musician friends, work moms, and fathers who built, hauled, and lawyered. But I also helped. Despite moving more than five thousand miles away, I didn’t end



up failing my son. Our distance served to forestall my hovering impulses, allowing him freedom to experiment. And my struggles gave me empathy for his travails.

Propelled an uncomfortable distance from my Project Runway couch, I inadvertently accomplished what parenting books breezily recommend: I got a life. I probably even set an example or two along the way. That's the kind of mothering with no expiration date.