“Mother and infant grow together in order to grow apart.”
-Paul V. Trad, MD

Ellie lingered at her two year old son Jeremiah’s bedside as he finally drifted off to sleep. It seems the two had had a minor disagreement as to whether or not it was in fact his bedtime! She knew that he would be cranky in the morning for their trip to the shore if he didn’t get enough sleep. But oh, did the little character put up an admirable argument for why he should have the right to stay up as late as his eight year old sister! His father Jack empathized with Ellie’s plight as she finally terminated the discussion by bribing him with the offer to ride up to bed on her shoulders. Jack found something endearing about the scene, and Ellie made a mental note to tease him later with a good scolding for chuckling softly at her struggle from behind the safety of the evening newspaper. But after the mock scolding, Ellie became somber, and Jack noticed a tear on her cheek. “Our little boy is growing up, Ellie, growing up. But don’t worry. He’s got a long ways to go, and he’s going to need you for years to come!” She punched him playfully on his shoulder. He gets it...he really gets it.

Ellie had just experienced another episode of the sweet-sad repetitive cycle of dependence-independence that is the hallmark of effective parenting in a securely attached relationship. Even as I write, it occurs to me that this cycle begins literally at the very beginning of pregnancy, when the placenta, contributed by the baby, attaches to the wall of mother’s uterus. Mother literally depends upon the fetus to give her the opportunity to meet the fetal baby’s dependency needs. From then on, dependency is a two-way street, so that truly a better way to think of healthy dependency is to use the expression “inter-dependency”. So during pregnancy, the baby depends upon mother to provide nourishment through the placenta. But mother depends on baby to grow so that she can feel pregnant, and to begin to move around so that she can be sure that he’s not only alive but well.

Ellie and Jeremiah are securely attached to each other. For that very reason, Jeremiah is learning to think independently and to know and self-validate his feelings. And he trusts his mother enough to safely engage in a dispute about bedtime. If the rest of his childhood and adolescence is comprised predominantly of more episodes of the normal occasional engagement in conflict within his intimate relationships, he will grow into adulthood capable of establishing and sustaining joyful, intimate relationships with friends, family, coworkers, marital partner and his own children. Watching him in the course of this maturation, mother and father will experience pride in him and themselves...and “sadness” that the child-rearing phase of their relationship with him is over.

Jessica and her husband Eric were joyful when at long last their unrelenting efforts in two different fertility clinics resulted in their first pregnancy. Ultrasound revealed that they were going to have a baby girl. While
they were equally joyful when they learned of the pregnancy, Eric made a mental note that Jessica seemed just a bit subdued when they learned that the baby was a girl. Never less, the pregnancy proceeded without any complications, as did the delivery of a beautiful baby girl. They had agreed to name their little girl Jennifer, in memory of Jessica’s younger sister who was hit and killed by a car when Jessica was ten years old. Jessica bonded nicely with her new baby; but Eric noted the return of that somber affect in Jessica around the time that baby Jennifer began to crawl. And then when she was ready to toddle, Jessica became anxious and depressed to the point that she did not facilitate Jennifer’s walking and scolded Eric for trying to help her, insisting that Jennifer was not ready to walk. Jennifer became so upset over this disagreement that the pediatrician recommended the couple for some marital counseling.

The marital/family therapist, skilled in attachment-focused therapy, helped Jessica and Eric toward the discovery that Jessica had serious unresolved feelings about the loss of her sister. She recalled that she had warned her sister about dashing out into the street after she missed the ball she had thrown to her, but her sister paid no attention to her. In the therapy Jessica got in touch with her combination of anger at her sister for abandoning her and guilt for having thrown the ball. As she worked through these feelings, she suddenly realized to her utter surprise that she was angry at her daughter for wanting to learn to walk! She then easily made the connection between the traumatic loss of her sister and her anxiety over “losing” her daughter to her growing independence. The symbolism of her daughter’s “getting her first set of wheels” brought too close to the surface her unresolved anger at her sister for leaving her. She could not permit that irrational anger into consciousness, and the price she paid for it was a combination of anxiety and depression. Upon completion of her therapy, Jessica was free of her immobilizing depression and readily to resume with the sweet-sadness of facilitating her daughter’s achievement of milestones.

Life is full of paradoxes—well, apparent paradoxes—until we figure them out. Then they are paradoxes no more! Truly, there may be nothing in the whole universe more cementing of a permanent, loving connection between children and their caregivers than the transcendent feeling of the caregiver’s unwavering presence and love-based commitment to “being there” for them. For every “letting go” of the more dependent relationship with our children comes the opportunity to reconnect with the child who has blossomed into yet an even more interesting and varied version of the prior kid. Without the letting go, as we saw with Jessica, the joyful “reunion” with the “new” child cannot happen.

A final note: I’ve been focusing on the growth of the child. But with each active partnership in the achievement of a new milestone in our children, we as parents will grow some more, as did Ellie and as did Jessica with the help of good therapy. If nothing else, they learned that on the other side of the sadness of life moving on is the even greater satisfaction of getting to know their more mature children with an intimacy that sort of has a different feel to it, but is no less intense than before. After all, if we are pursuing wisdom like we should, we’ll always have something indispensable to share with our children long into their adulthood, not the least of which is parenting wisdom we learned while raising them!

So I’d conclude by suggesting that we might extend Dr. Trad’s quote to something like this: “Mother and infant grow together in order to grow apart, in order to grow more together, in order to grow more apart, in order to grow more together....”