

## Nail holes

Fifty-one. That's the number of nail holes that stared back at me from the basement walls. I had counted because my wife was incredulous. I, on the other hand, was not surprised. I had heard more than my share of banging going on in our home's basement apartment in which my stepdaughter had resided for the last six months. She had a very active social life.

But now, she'd vacated her cozy abode, moving on to the next stage of her life's trajectory, leaving an empty apartment echoing with the silence of her absence. Brand new when she moved in, it once had walls that were unsullied, flawless, and immaculate. Now they looked... well somewhat defiled.

In hindsight, my wife and I realized that giving her daughter a nail gun as a present for her last birthday may have been somewhat ill-advised.

Okay, that's not true. We gave it to her for Christmas.

In the roughly two hundred days of her occupation, I deduced that she averaged about one nailing every ninety-six hours. Not too shabby, but she *was* in the prime of youth.

But the sheer number of holes also raised a few questions. For someone who seemed fairly well-adjusted, why had she had so many hang-ups? It was obvious to us that she didn't even possess fifty-one unique items to hang on her single studio apartment walls. No, many of the holes were clustered together in tight patterns, a clear indication of the use of the tried-and-true "nail-and-prayer" approach to picture hanging. A constant quest for perfect placement. In other words, if at first you don't succeed... you try, try, again and again and again. Until you get it right, or at least close enough.

But the apartment was her space, her sanctuary. A place where she could do whatever she wanted. Posters, mirrors, plaques, photos, boyfriends— anything and everything that could be nailed to the wall... was. Her apartment walls were the place where she could express herself, be comfortable, and change her environment to suit her needs. They were her canvas, her expression, her comfort. A home is where you can pound a nail into a wall whenever the need arises. Damn the consequences!

It was somewhere in this timeframe that the thought occurred to me—these holes in the walls weren't just voids in the vast expanse of painted drywall. They were a record, a history, a story. They marked, in a way, the stages of her life, a silent chronicle of her growth and evolution.

And this wasn't the first time, as parents, that we had been left staring at numerous small dark cavities. That process began with their very first breath. And it never truly ended.

As babies, our children hang onto us for their every need. They are dependent on us for every aspect of life—their survival, their happiness, and their love. And we enthusiastically bear their weight. We are their walls, their protection, their comfort. And we will not, cannot, let go of them.

But as they grow older, they become the ones who start to let go. Bit by bit, nail by nail, they pull away from us, their strands of dependence loosening with each passing day.

The first nail hole comes when our little one stops nursing and moves on to solid food. Mother and baby no longer partake in that special time of bonding. Mom's memories of that period remain, along with a rather sizable hole in her heart. Such progress is exceedingly painful, but it's an essential step in the baby's journey into adulthood.

Little by little, over the years, new nails are hammered in, and old ones are unceremoniously, and often painfully, yanked out.

Our babies need to be carried everywhere. But before we know it, toddlers, fueled by their insatiable urge for independence, squirm and wriggle, and finally demand, "Put me down!"

Every morning, they have been dressed by us, until one day, the inevitable rebellion comes. "No, I can do it myself!" they declare, their tiny fists clenched in defiance. The count of tiny dark marks grows.

We are tempted to keep the nails in, to hold on to them, to keep them close for as long as possible. But we know that is not the answer. A wall cluttered with nails, each one hanging a relic of the past, is not what our child needs. Old nails, and the dependencies they represent, must be removed, as painful as the process may be for both parent and child.

And as each nail is removed, our children gain more independence, more confidence, and more freedom. And correspondingly, we lose more control, more influence, and more presence. We feel pride, but it's always paired with the pang of a loss. Another hole in the wall.

We teach them to ride a bike, running along to keep them from falling. But then, in a blink, they're gone. Around the block. Vanished from sight. Mom or Dad's assistance is no longer needed or desired. Pride and pain bond together as another nail bites the dust.

There comes a day, unknown at the time, somewhere lost in the future, when we pick up our child and set them down for the very last time. Looking back, most of us can't recall the exact moment this happened, but even so, we acknowledge that it had to have occurred. Gone forever were the mornings when they'd magically reappear in their bed, transported there after falling asleep in the car or on the sofa.

Occasionally, the roles reverse. Our children cling to the nails and plead with us to remain. Now, challenges are amplified, forcing us to pry fingers loose, even amidst fierce protest, the sting of their departure momentarily eclipsed by the absolute necessity to set them free. Only later, in the quiet aftermath, can we truly feel the widening gaps marked by absent hugs and pulled-out nails.

At some point, they stop hugging Mom in public. Somebody might see them. They begin to pull away more deliberately, leaving a trail of nails in the dust. In high school, they don't need us anymore. At least that's what they say out loud. When they learn to drive, it seems as if we hardly see them at all. The hole count mounts, its silent tally a stark reminder of their gradual escape from our orbit.

They leave. And we let them go. They go out to make their own holes, their own choices, their own mistakes. To live their own lives. They begin to hang their nails on to other people. New faces in the world will soon begin to rely on them for support. They begin to accumulate their own sets of holes.

When we take time to reminisce, we feel the accumulation of these holes, no longer quite so painful, now stirring up memories of earlier times.

And after a time, we realize that these holes are all we have left. Those tiny voids have become the catalyst for memories of love, sacrifice, and shared moments with our children. The scars left behind are reminders of times spent on life's most important things, testaments to a love poured into the most essential building blocks of their lives. We would not trade them for the world.

And we hope that someday our offspring will remember the nails that held them up for so long, inserted to meet the needs of the moment, and then painstakingly removed when those moments passed.

And so, as my wife and I peered at the empty walls of the apartment, we found ourselves staring at a museum of memories curated in drywall.

Maybe we'll take our time filling those holes.