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Evolution and the Empty Nest Syndrome

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Michael Shermer publishes *Skeptic* magazine, teaches at Claremont Graduate University, and writes a regular column for *Scientific American*. He is an ardent defender of evolutionary theory and a well-known critic of all supernatural claims. In today's edition of *USA Today*, Shermer writes about the "empty nest syndrome" — the difficulty many parents face when their offspring go off to college.



While this has always been a difficult time for parents, in recent years many parents seem to be having a more difficult time than usual. Some colleges report that parents have to be told to go home. One college reported about a mother who slept in her daughter's dorm room for a couple of nights until the girl's roommate complained to school authorities.

Shermer has now experienced the "empty nest syndrome" for himself, as his daughter began her college studies just over a month ago. He clearly misses his daughter. And yet, how does he explain this experience?

He writes: "Why does it hurt so bad? Science has an answer: We are social mammals who experience deep attachment to our fellow friends and family, an evolutionary throwback to our Paleolithic hunter-gatherer days of living in small bands."

You read that right. Shermer reduces the love of a parent for a child to "an evolutionary throwback." He adds to this a physiological theory:

We parents can't help feeling this way, and neuroscience explains why. Addictive chemicals such as dopamine and oxytocin surge through the brain and body during positive social interactions (especially touch). This causes us to feel closer to one another. Between parents and offspring, it cements a bond so solid that it is broken only under the most unusual (and usually pathological) circumstances.

He concludes with words that can hardly be described as sentimental. "Each of us parents makes one small contribution to the evolutionary imperative of life's continuity from one generation to the next," he suggests.

Rarely is the sterility and bleakness of the evolutionary worldview displayed with such candor. The love of a parent for a child is reduced to an evolutionary factor that works through a physiological process of chemical interactions in the brain.

If evolution is true, it must explain everything. Michael Shermer's article demonstrates just how unsatisfying that explanation is.

Michael Shermer, "[Making Sense of the Empty Nest Syndrome](#)," *USA Today*, Wednesday, October 13, 2010.

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