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Dept: Memoir

**HED: The son also rises
Each generation redefines the meaning of success**

By Beth Kaplan

In a few weeks, my son will be home. My boy is six-foot-eight, 22 years old and, judging by the photos I've received from Australia where he's been traveling and working for eight months, he is a man now, his body newly filled out. He learned to scuba dive in the Great Barrier Reef and worked at a resort where he was ostensibly a waiter, although he seems to have spent most of his time swimming. His current travel companion is female and dives as well as he does. This is all I have been able to glean in eight months of cryptic, punctuation-less emails.

And now he is coming home, where his old job in a restaurant is waiting for him, along with the rest of his life. He'll be moving back into his childhood bedroom, which was turned into a spare room for guests long before he left. He will be here temporarily, although neither of us knows what that means. I will be living with a well-traveled young diver with tattoos, a blond beard and a pierced nipple, who looks a lot like my boy Sam.

When I was 22 going on 23, I had accomplished much more than my son has at the same age. I moved out at 18, became a professional actor while still in university, and by 21 had earned a BA in English (oh, how useful). I spent a year at theatre school in London, went to Toronto to seek my fortune, and at Sam's age was auditioning and acting at night while holding down an office job. My rent was \$60 a month for a room in a co-op house with shared kitchen, bathroom and cockroaches; my housemates and I made our own Guinness in a garbage can. On the surface, I was vivacious and powerful. Inside I was a writhing mass of terror.

My grandfather liked to boast about my career; after he died, we found several tattered reviews from plays I'd been in, carefully folded, still in his wallet. He would have had a hard time waiting for clippings from his great-grandchildren. My 26-year-old daughter, who has a maple leaf tattooed below her navel, didn't finish her undergraduate degree and is selling sunglasses, working as a nanny and living with her boyfriend and an array of buddies while figuring out what's next. She is gifted at catering and cooking but does not want to work at these, because then she would "no longer enjoy them." Her brother is also a skilled host and cook; after high school he worked as a waiter and bartender for two years to save for his travels. He talks of the hospitality industry, maybe the wine business; his sister, of early childhood education. These are not what my grandfather would have considered worthy goals or accomplishments.

But in this new age of adjusted expectations, I feel that they are. These young people are independent and more or less self-supporting; they are clear-headed, funny, kind to

animals, the elderly and each other. Of course they have insecurities and problems, but even as children of divorce — with an often frantic mother and mostly out-of-town father — they are profoundly positive, with many friends.

I know that being positive is not going to complete their education or pay their rent. And maybe so much ease and contentment leads to complacency; with a bit more anxiety, wouldn't they be fighting harder for a real place in the world? At the same age as my kids, the children of our Korean neighbours — the couple who own the corner store — all play musical instruments, speak several languages and are becoming lawyers and doctors. These are achievements my grandfather would have recognized and appreciated. Being an open, thoughtful person earning minimum wage would not.

After my own speedy launch into paid employment, I worked as an actress for nearly 10 years, but always at the back of my mind, a voice was saying, "Get out of here." At 30, I fell in love, got pregnant and left the stage with relief to go back to school. I became a stay-at-home mother of two and part-time student without the slightest idea what I wanted to do when I grew up. Even after the harsh wake-up call of divorce, I floundered and flailed. Perhaps, in an increasingly complex society, taking some time in the early years is not such a bad idea. Maybe scuba diving and selling sunglasses while you figure out what direction to take means you won't spend a decade charging down a dead end. But is it better to spend your youth doing the wrong thing or doing what looks, in my churlish moments, to be not much at all?

I guess there's no point comparing the aims and attainments of different generations. My grandfather was an immigrant who worked non-stop to make a safe, respectable home for his family. My parents came of age in the turmoil of a world war, and I grew up with a stifling set of rules in the '50s that we threw away in the '60s. These young adults, my children, are afloat in a world changing so fast that what matters most, perhaps, is to live with flexibility and tolerance. As for a work ethic more like my grandfather's — I hope they'll develop that too, in time. Not everything is fun; that lesson will eventually take hold.

But they are comfortable in their own skin, pierced and tattooed though it may be. To live with plans and appetite, even Grandpa would admit, is a good place to start.