

Moving Day
August, 2013

“We should start with the refrigerator. That’s the heaviest.” Marcia makes the wise suggestion for our first load up to our daughter’s dorm room. The family wagon and SUV are both chock full of collegiate flotsam, and the fridge is first to go. Amanda offers to help, but I’ll have none of it. It’s easy to feel ancient on a college campus, but just as easy to pretend you’re young.

I’m guessing the young don’t count the steps, though. After navigating the vehicular chaos of the parking lot, each trip includes 48 steps to the top of Friley Hall at Iowa State University. Eight steps, and turn, eight more steps and turn, eight more steps and turn, eight steps and turn, six times, until the steps mercifully end and you reach the top. The stairs have endured since 1926, and you can’t help but wonder how many thousands of overloaded parents have counted the steps before you.

Once at the top, the trek continues through the sprawling building to her room. As you walk down the hall, each door has a handcrafted sign that tells the name of the student, their major, and whether they are new to the floor or returning. Amanda is returning, yet, in a Twitter and Facebook connected world, she never really left for the summer. You try to pick up some sense of the friends she talks about by what they’ve taped to their doors, but it goes by so fast (and this box is so darned heavy) it’s hopeless.

A spirit of youthful positivity prevails in college dorms, but an honors floor at a public university with a world-class engineering reputation is another level. Classes start a week from now, but some students are already studying. Last year, they repainted the hallway walls with simple graphics of colorful paper airplanes leaving trails of dotted lines behind them as they loop and swoop through imaginary flights. At face value, it is cute. But the deeper meaning of all the intersecting flights before them, and all the loops and swoops

they'll take together ... that's the enduring message. The playful airplane graphics distract from your tiring legs in this near century old temple of egalitarianism, work ethic and hope.

The loads continue, and you pass other parents on the steps with the determination of sherpas. We exchange polite smiles as we pass, and the passing smiles tell the same story of pride, and concern, and optimism for our children. It is convenient to complain about government, but the fact is this government operation is a beacon to every corner of the globe. We moved to Iowa for its exceptional quality of life, founded on exceptional public schools. As we trudge up the stairs at one of three Iowa public universities coming back to life this fall, students from more than 100 countries are making the same ascent. It is unfathomable that politics in Washington are so toxic to force the vast majority of these students to return to their home countries when they graduate, building economies to compete against ours.

The geopolitics don't matter much on the stairwells, however, as we're all in it together for the day. A protocol develops whereby you do the quick calculus of how heavy the load is and how old the parent is, and get out of the way when your sum is less than theirs. Thus the day slogs on, and not perfectly so. The freight elevator sits idle. The parking pass is or is not working. The IKEA chair takes three hours to assemble.

The day becomes perfect with the realization that the pack mule routine up the stairs is just another iteration of something you'd give anything to do just one more time. The weightiest – and most beautiful - words I've ever heard were "it's a girl". Lucky beyond measure, Amanda has made that weighty declaration as light as one can imagine. Would I like to spin the clock backward and give her one more piggyback ride up the stairs to bed? You bet. But that crate of shoes looks more pressing at the moment.

Goodnight Sweetpea. Go Cyclones.