

Chapter 1 - Basecamp Home

Here's an idea I've been working on for a long time, and now it's time to share.

Let's think of home as basecamp. A basecamp is a point of departure and a point of return, and in between it's a hub for living purposefully with grace, generosity, and readiness. Come back to basecamp, or live in basecamp, for warmth and love, lively dinners, and a salon of ideas.

To all the parents who know they're not done when the kids leave the house, to all the families who are sustaining their tribe through years of growth, and to all the life travelers who know they have a place they can always return to:

Home is really your basecamp.

Basecamp is the place where expeditions and adventures begin.

It's the place where the climbers and trekkers come to acclimate, get warm, take on provisions, get medical attention, hang prayer flags, and get mail.

In basecamp, travelers get healthy, get directions, leave messages, repair equipment, and drink with friends.

While they're in basecamp they get in shape, listen to their elders' tales, do chores, charge their devices, gather their courage, do laundry, and repack their bags.

In basecamp they can be their best selves on a quest. And in basecamp and at home, we expect them to do all this.

We know that when they leave, they'll be back.

Some time ago I started to think about home as a basecamp. Even before our kids left for college and people started commenting on our upcoming "empty nest," I could see that for me, that metaphor wouldn't work. Home is a place that people can count on while they head out on their various adventures and come back. Our "climbers" were going to high school, out on first dates, struggling with homework, going to science camp, and learning how to drive. We kept things operational and made a supportive place to be during all of it - we managed our "Basecamp Home" and endured and enjoyed the joys, troubles, and growth along the way.

There are some clear values that underlie our Basecamp Home that have become important for me. It's how I was raised, and it's how we live now: basecamp is open to all, generous, orderly and well-provisioned, and ready. It's a co-op with excellent hospitality and with expectations for community and sharing.

It's real, too - not always in good shape, the fridge isn't always full, circumstances change beyond our control, and others around us might now be ready to take this all on. Still, even for one Basecamp Home "manager," this metaphor can be an organizing concept that's helpful. I think about the roles it gives us who are home, long term or even for just a bit. Like mountaineers, whoever is in basecamp maintains basecamp, does basecamp chores, keeps

their area tidy, stays fit and purposeful, brings fun, shares what they have, and listens to the basecamp managers.

So home is not an empty nest - it's basecamp.

The metaphors we use make a difference, and "basecamp" is a metaphor choice. Unlike an empty nest, basecamp sends its young ones away knowing they'll return. Sometimes they're back for a while, sometimes it's a quick weekend turnaround. Sometimes it's for a single night to "crash" on the way to another destination. Other times, they're living in the back house.

Sometimes they come back successful, having bagged a summit and full of wild stories and proud accomplishments. Sometimes they come back deeply disappointed, silent and morose. And sometimes they come back hurt, in need of immediate attention and weeks of rehab. And then eventually they head back out. So it's really not an empty nest: it's a busy, ready home.

I don't know if every culture has an expression like "empty nest," but it's a metaphor that's used frequently to describe home after children have grown and left home's childhood arrangements. Parents in an empty nest feel sad and abandoned even though they wanted those birds to fly away, and knew that day would come. It's seen as an inevitable phase of parenting - parents are said to become "empty-nesters." It's an opportunity to move on or to rediscover oneself, but when that takes place in an empty nest, it seems to have less purpose. Even more, I've heard talk of "failure to launch," when young people don't meet expectations for leaving the nest. It's worrisome to me that the "empty nest" metaphor could also be damaging.

So I reject this shallow metaphor because life is a lot more complicated than this, and has a lot more to offer. An empty nest implies loss and "emptiness" - but don't we still live here? And in a nest, when the young birds leave they don't come back - but don't we all know that kids will come back home many times? In bird life, there's another batch of eggs coming next spring and the nest must be prepared for a new family of baby birds. Not so for us.

Very intentionally, basecamp is now the metaphor I invoke whenever empty nests are mentioned. Or whenever stories of sad departures and unexpected returns are told. Or when I'm sitting here in my living room on a Sunday afternoon, after chores and before the week starts, needing a reminder of my "why." Home is really my basecamp, not an empty nest.

Basecamp Home is the mindset I need, too.

A Basecamp Home gives me purpose. I can lean into the role of basecamp manager, whereas there's not much to do in an empty nest. I think about organizing basecamp for the "expeditions" that my family members are undertaking. They're "summitting" the first semester of college/graduate school, heading out to Europe on a travel adventure with buddies, navigating relationships, and forging out on steep life trails. And they come back often, and when they do, we're here, ready. We organize basecamp for us, for my husband and me, too,

because we are in Basecamp Home almost every day. Then sometimes I'm the one traveling, in and out of basecamp while others maintain the routines.

Returning to basecamp holds no shame. Basecamp supports the return, even when goals were not achieved, and provides rest, recuperation, and the sharing of stories. When someone knows they have a basecamp, they might feel more ready to take on those adventures. And when someone knows they're managing a basecamp, there's purpose in the coming and going, and hopefully there's even enjoyment in the staying.

Basecamp Home is our lived experience, our intentional mindset for living. I'm so glad to look around the house when basecamp is full, and see all the towels on the racks, the bedding stacked high, and the fridge bursting. To hear the loud laughs from the next room, to taste the new dishes made by the visiting basecamper, to listen to stories and toast the summits along the way.

And then Basecamp Home sustains me when everyone leaves again. It's a workable, adaptable, and creative life metaphor. It's a mindset that is adaptable and flexible to meet our collective needs.

Departure Day

Holding my coffee cup, I walk around the house looking for anything that needs to go with him - the laundry and toiletries, the hats and beach towels, the kitchen gadgets and tools, papers and books, chargers and plugs - and I start piling stuff in the staging area to be packed.

And then it's time for him to lay it all out on the living room floor, carefully folding clothes and stashing things into each suitcase or bag. My heart is starting to sink but I don't let on, of course. I catch my husband's eye and I can tell he's feeling it, too.

I've learned to do the hard things while he's still here: wash the wine glasses from the great bottle we shared last night, and throw his towel in the laundry, good-bye chores that are easier to do with him still singing in the next room.

Sooner than I want, we're taking suitcases and bags out into the hallway and down the elevator. We all carry things out to the car, and stand aside while he loads it up. I think about all the car packing he's watched us do, and I think about all the car packing I watched my dad do. The logic holds, and soon it's all wedged in solidly.

The hugs are anguish - how do you hug someone forever? He's excited to get going, though, and this is just what we want: our grown son climbing into his car to drive away to his next adventure, cheery and prepared and glad. He turns on the music and sets directions on his phone, checks his mirrors, carefully backs out and then blasts up the street and away. I almost expect jet exhaust to ruffle my hair.

We're quiet as we do the reverse walk back to the lobby, elevator, hallway, apartment. My heart is in my stomach and will stay there for the afternoon, like a sob that can't get out.

I start tidying up and making the apartment just ours again. And then, because it's departure day, basecamp gets treats, gets to do something fun, just us. This time we walk over to the Farmers Market and buy Portside croissants and frothy lattes, and dip the bread into the coffee, my comfort food from way back.

Basecamp Home is quiet again for now.

With that story, and with this first chapter, the Basecamp Home concept is introduced. Each chapter will be followed by a conversation to extend the ideas, talking about them with people who've been thinking about this for a while and who have lots of experience to share. These transcribed conversations might also invite our readers to consider other aspects of Basecamp Home as we develop this concept together.

Talking about Basecamp Home Chapter 1, July 7, 2023

Cynthia Grutzik and Matthew Lewis

Cynthia

Whew, reading that "Departure Day" story takes me back to those moments. And we just had another departure day in our San Francisco basecamp, so it's all feeling very real to me these days.

Let's get started.

I'm Cynthia Grutzik, and I'm speaking here with Matthew Lewis. Even though I've been the one to start writing about this idea, for some time now you've joined as a coauthor and thought partner, and I know you're enthusiastic about this project. We're both parents of twenty-somethings, alongside our long-time partners. We live in different parts of California, and have different careers. I think it's cool to start this idea as a Mom basecamp manager, then to bring in a Dad to add another dimension to it all.

So tell me how this Basecamp Home concept sits with you. How does it apply to your life?

Matthew

First of all, when we first discussed this, when you first used that metaphor with me, it just clicked because the "empty nest" metaphor never made sense to me.

It was always a curiosity, and as our boys were getting near the end of high school, people were saying "Ohh you're about to become empty nesters" and I always said, no, no, I'm not. It's the wrong metaphor, because they're coming back. Young birds leave the nest and never come back.

One of the reasons it clicked is because that's what my lived experience was. I chose a university a couple hours drive from my folks home. My older brother went to the same school and at Thanksgiving he came home, and at Christmas, too. And I did the same thing. And I also came home during the first few summers and worked jobs from home. So for me, "Basecamp Home" was a metaphor that fit. The "emptiness" metaphor just didn't seem appropriate. Our family reconvened...

And that's why I immediately appropriated it, and have been spreading it extensively with credit where credit is due back to you, Cyn, for why this is a really good idea.

The Basecamp Home metaphor doesn't just fit better, it's so constructive and it's so empowering. It's not an excuse or an admission of suffering. It's an affirmation that we're going to continue to work for a really constructive, supportive, loving relationship in our home.

Cynthia

I think that's a great way to summarize it. And I know your own Basecamp Home has a name. Can you talk about the Flewtro Basecamp?

Matthew

We knew that our home was sort of always a basecamp because it our family is a "portmanteau" family. It's pushing pieces together. We put together two families and three last names when we got married: The name of our home, "Flewtro" combines our three names: Fletcher, Lewis, and Sutro.

So, we have twin boys and for their high school senior year we decided to host an exchange student "brother", Leo, from Germany. Leo is a fantastic young man and a lifelong addition to our family. So this was the first real expansion of our family, our Basecamp Home.

So this idea of having a family, but having that family be able to physically expand and contract under certain conditions, just seems to work.

And so we took off and ran with the Basecamp Home metaphor because it's just such a cool idea that fits on so many dimensions. We made a little sign that hangs in our outside pavilion and we've really tried to embrace the concept in many parts of our lives.

Cynthia

That's so cool, and I know we'll get to the keys later, but that's another piece of it.

Matthew

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cynthia

So, we have this metaphor and we really like how it works as a mindset for living a full life. Now let's broaden it. Let's talk about ways that it might work or not. Let's take a couple of minutes to talk about some of the other ideas that have surfaced as we've been working on this idea.

For one thing, I like that Basecamp Home is mobile. We've moved so many times, and I realized one day that a basecamp is usually a tent - just pull up the tent stakes, round up the expedition, and head to the next site. Wherever we make home, that is all of our basecamp.

Matthew

We realized that when our sons were out traveling around Europe after graduating, and my wife I could rent a canal boat in southern England with the idea of crossing paths with them on their way back to the states. Boy, were they glad to see us and our boat. They were exhausted and really needed a mobile basecamp right then, and we loved being there for them. It was a fantastic trip and we included my mother-in-law, their Nana, in the adventure.

Another aspect we've talked about a lot is that Basecamp Home may be really culturally specific idea. The idea of being worried about having an "empty nest" when kids are grown and leave may be an American idea from the 20th century. [We'll talk more about that in Chapter 2.](#)

We had another exchange student, our new "daughter" from Italy. [We Recently we recently](#) got to visit her and meet her family there. When we talked about the Basecamp Home concept with her Italian family, (with our daughter translating!) they were confused. They said, "Why would you want that? The kids should get up and get out of the house." And when we talked more about it, it was because their family actually lived down the street from each other, or in the apartment above the restaurant, and they assumed that they were going to have their extended family around, all within a short walk away. That idea was that people are never going to go that far away. And if they do, of course, they're going to come back. [They're going to live in the town/village.](#) They'll leave my home, and I want them to, but I know they're going to live close by.

Commented [1]: Clarify - this would seem to mean that the BH concept DOES makes sense, but you're saying they didn't make sense of it...

Cynthia

I think that's a great example. And it's also culturally specific because it's about mountaineering and expeditions, and tied to a specific sporting activity that people who live around mountains and mountaineering are familiar with, but other people might not be. Maybe the Basecamp Home concept can be expanded to include any place that one comes from, like one's village where the elders live and where everyone returns for holidays and celebrations. I like that it captures the need all of us have to belong somewhere.

Matthew

Agreed. And as you unpack this concept of what a basecamp is, and what it means for people and homes, everybody gets to decide which pieces of metaphor are going to best work in their lives. For us, Basecamp Home was what a [visitor kid](#) from another country needed, a place to get their feet down on the ground, get over jet lag, and get ready to go out and explore. It's a physical basecamp where you literally can come and shove your backpack under the bed and unroll your sleeping bag. But then there's the emotional basecamp, too, which is when you can tell people, look, the doors are open. If you need someone to talk to, or you need a place to go, or to just have a listener, that's also part of Basecamp Home. We're here to help you. And if you need to be "pulled off the mountain," meaning we need to send you a bunch of roses or we

need to send you a care package of food, or actually rescue you from a bad place, whatever it is you need, we're here to do that as well.

Cynthia

I heard one friend talk about it as everybody needing to have some place to tether themselves so they don't just drift off. Their basecamp might be a college community, or a faith community, a place that they can connect to regularly that's welcoming and ready for them and is a place where they are needed, too. Again, it's belonging.

-That makes me think of another way that Basecamp Home works for me. The basecamp I make can be at work, where I'm creating an environment where my colleagues can come get what they need to do their best work, and where I'm welcoming, organized, well-provisioned, and ready - the basics of a basecamp. My colleagues are my travelers.

Matthew

Yes, I have a number of friends who have moved to a new city, and one of the first things they do is try to find a church. It's partially because of their spiritual needs, but it's also because they need the support of a community – the friends and support and information and all the stuff that comes along with that community. I think that's part of how you find basecamps along the way that can support you.

Another thing that comes up when I've discussed the Basecamp Home idea with people is that they get a little anxious because they think, what happens if they don't want to leave? I like having them in my house, but I don't want ~~them to~~ in my house forever. I want to be a good host and a good basecamp manager, but at some point the goal is for the travelers to go on to the next adventure. In our home, we get at this by addressing it up front. We ask, What are your plans? How long do you plan on staying here? How can we support you in your next steps? The idea is to establish up front that there is a time to come and be here, and there probably should be a time when you're going to be leaving as well. So let's talk about that and work out a plan.

Cynthia

That just happened in our basecamp, when our son came back home between journeys. His job is fully-remote for now, and he's been a digital nomad for a few months. He decided to stay here for a while to make decisions about where to go next, and of course to save some money. After a couple of weeks, the conversations began to shift to planning and options for next moves. Basecamp Home was on my mind a lot while he sorted out his stuff, got a satellite phone, joined our gym membership, and collected lots of advice and information from other seasoned travelers. Then one day, he bought a ticket and the next steps firmed up quickly.

Matthew

I could tell you the same stories about my boys. They ~~quickly get pretty~~ comfortable in Basecamp Home, but a ~~they always have a~~ departure ~~plan is usually in the back of their minds,~~ and it ~~eventually~~ becomes the subject of dinner table talk.

Cynthia

So just to wrap us up, overall for us this Basecamp Home metaphor and concept and mindset does work so well. And the more we talk about it with people and understand different dimensions of it, it's clearly worth exploring and trying out for ourselves, and with others. Thanks so much, Matthew, for keeping us talking about this, and for encouraging me to keep writing, and for creating this website for the Basecamp Home idea to live.

We've got six chapters [of](#) Basecamp Home, and after each chapter we're going to include a conversation with people who are interested in talking more about that idea and expanding it. Stay tuned - and welcome to Basecamp Home.

