



Things I Wish I'd Known
Before We Got Married

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I Wish I Had Known . . .

That the saying
“LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER”
and “LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON”
is not a myth

I am not suggesting that the girl you marry will turn out to be exactly like her mother, nor that the man will be exactly like his father. I am saying that you are both greatly influenced by your parents.

If he has a father who is controlling and verbally abusive, don't be surprised if in ten years he has similar traits. To some degree, we are all products of our environment. Research indicates that abusive men were almost always abused as children.¹

You may be asking, “But can't we learn from their poor example and change our own behavior?” The answer is yes, and the important word is “learn.” If the son of an abuser does not take specific steps to understand abuse—why his father became an abuser, and what he needs to do to break the pattern—then he is

likely to repeat it.

If a girl's mother is alcoholic, we know that statistically she is more likely to become an alcoholic.² However, she is not *destined* to alcoholism. If she takes positive action to understand alcoholism and learns more constructive ways to respond to stress and disappointment, she can break the alcoholic chain. Therefore, in a dating relationship if either of you has a parent with a destructive lifestyle, the responsible action is to enroll in a class, read books, talk with counselors, and discuss with each other what you are learning. Don't sweep these issues under the rug.

On the lighter side, look at the physical appearance of your same-sex parent and you are likely looking at yourself twenty years from now. If the father is balding, the son may well look the same in twenty years. If the mother is active and energetic, so will the daughter be.

Recently, my wife and I spent a week at the beach with our daughter Shelley, her husband John, and our two grandchildren. After breakfast the first morning, we carried our umbrella to the beach. Our son-in-law was on one knee and, with an auger, was boring a hole into the ground so that we could set up the umbrella. With a smile on her face, our daughter dipped her hand

Most of us are far more like our parents than we realize.

in a bucket of water and sprinkled the cold water on her husband's back. I said to her, "You are illustrating one of the points in my book—'like mother, like daughter.' That's exactly the kind of thing your mother would do." Later that day as John was leaving to go to the grocery store, Shelley said to us, loud enough for John to hear, "He's such a wonderful husband." That too is what her mother has said of me on numerous occasions. While I don't

know about the truthfulness of the statement, I must confess I like to hear it. I have an idea that John feels the same way.

Whether we are talking about positive or negative characteristics, most of us are far more like our parents than we realize. I remember the young husband who said to me, "I knew that her mother did not wear makeup. She was the product of the 'hippie generation.' But I never dreamed that Julia would decide to stop wearing makeup. As long as I've known her, she's worn makeup. We never discussed it while we were dating because I never thought it would be a problem. But now we are having these long discussions about the pros and cons of makeup. I don't think I'm going to win the argument."

Communication patterns are another area in which we tend to be like our parents. For example, if you notice that her mother often interrupts her father when he is talking and corrects the details of his story by saying such things as "No, it wasn't on Tuesday, it was on Wednesday" or "It wasn't 2005, it was 2006," then you can expect the daughter to do the same. Perhaps you have already observed this behavior when you are talking. If this irritates you, now is the time to talk about it. If this pattern is not changed before marriage, it will not automatically change when you do get married.

One young man said, "It scares me to death when I am around her parents. Her mother talks constantly. She hardly takes a breath between sentences. She tells these elaborate stories, giving all the details. I feel trapped when I'm in her presence. There's no good place to leave the room to get a drink of water. I see a little bit of this in Annie and I'm afraid she's going to become like

"Her mother talks constantly. I feel trapped when I'm in her presence."

her mother. I don't think I can handle that." I was thrilled to hear him express this concern while they were still dating. I could tell that Annie did not quite understand what he was saying. So I suggested that the next time he was in the presence of his mother-in-law, he simply record thirty minutes of the conversation.

Later, when Annie listened to this recording, she realized that her mother seldom asked questions and when she did, she gave the other person only a moment to answer before she jumped back into her flow of words. She now understood how this speech pattern could not only be offensive but actually stifle genuine dialogue.

Because we have grown up with our parents, we don't recognize their patterns of communication as being unhealthy. For us, it is simply the way it has always been. It often takes someone outside the family drawing the communication pattern to our attention to help us understand why the pattern needs to be changed. Because we are influenced by our parents' communication patterns, we are very likely to adopt them as our own. The good news is that these communication patterns can be changed and the time to make the change is while you are dating.

If you observe his mom and dad arguing and you notice that his father eventually walks out of the room and leaves his wife's last statement hanging in the air, then you can expect that is the way the man you are dating will likely respond to arguments after you get married. Unless, of course, he reads this book and the two of you find a healthier way to resolve your conflicts.

Also look at the common courtesies that your mom and dad extend to each other. Does her father open the car door for her mother? If so, this is what she will expect of you. Does his father remove his ball cap when he enters the house? If not, that is what

you can expect of his son. Do you hear her mother answering for her father before he has the chance to speak? If so, that's what you can expect of her daughter. Does his father look at his wife when she is talking to him or does he watch television and give her no response? Whatever he does is likely what his son will do. Does her mother continually nag her father about cleaning up the garage or some other task that she wants him to do? If so, you can expect that from her daughter.

Is his father quiet and reserved or loud and outspoken? Is her mother independent, making her own decisions and seldom conferring with her husband? Does her mother cook meals? Does his father keep the car clean? Is her mother a stay-at-home mom or does she have her own vocation? Does his father own his own business or does he work for a company? Does his father mow the grass or does he hire someone to do it? Does her mother keep scrapbooks and photo albums? Is her mother highly active in church activities? What about his father? The answers to these questions will tell you what you can expect if you marry the person you are now dating. If any of the answers to these questions disturb you, this is the time to discuss them openly. The solution lies either in accepting these traits or negotiating change.

Often in today's fast-moving culture, dating couples will spend little time with each other's parents. They come to marriage without any clear understanding of the parental model with which the other person grew up. Even when couples spend time with each other's parents, they are not closely observing the behavior and communication patterns of parents. They may express appreciation for the positive things that they observe but are likely to ignore negative patterns of speech or behavior—because they cannot imagine that the person they are dating would

ever adopt those negative behaviors.

What I am saying is that they are, in fact, most likely to adopt those behaviors—unless conscious attention is given and positive steps taken to keep the young adult from drifting into the patterns they observed in childhood.

This is why I encourage couples to have enough exposure to each other's parents to get to know their personalities, communication patterns, values, and especially how they relate to each other. This is the model that has greatly influenced the person you are dating. If you observe things that trouble you, these need to be discussed thoroughly with your dating partner. If your concerns are serious, you need to discuss what steps will be taken to make sure that the old sayings "Like mother, like daughter" and "Like father, like son" will not become a reality in your relationship.

Talking It Over

FOR THE MAN:

- 1.** Make a list of the things you like about your father. Then make a list of the things you consider to be negative traits in your father. If the girl you are dating has spent considerable time with your father, ask her to make similar lists about observations she has made about your father.
- 2.** Use these lists as a basis for discussing the ways in which you would like to be different from your father.
- 3.** What specific steps will you take to begin to make these changes?

FOR THE WOMAN:

- 1.** Make a list of the things you like about your mother. Then make a list of the things you consider to be negative traits in your mother. If the man you are dating has spent considerable time with your mother, ask him to make similar lists about observations he has made about your mother.
- 2.** Use these lists as a basis for discussing the ways in which you would like to be different from your mother.
- 3.** What specific steps will you take to begin to make these changes?

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