



How to Succeed As a Mother-in-Law

by Jean Komaiko
Photos by Mickey Pallas

MY FRIEND Martha recently surprised me by announcing that she was learning to be an understudy to her mother-in-law.

"What?" I asked dubiously. "Weren't you the girl who said you've been doing a slow burn for eight years over your mother-in-law's tactless behavior? How come the new Pollyanna act?"

"Same girl," Martha laughed. "I didn't say I loved John's mother any better. But I took a look at myself, and wondered how I'd behave if someone else was playing the biblical Ruth and I was cast in the role of her mother-in-law Naomi. It's an interesting speculation. You ought to try it. I realized that I probably wouldn't do the job one whit better than John's mother, because it's one of the world's hardest relationships. I'd like to play the part well, so I decided that right now was the time to get some practice, to begin learning the cues for my lines."

"Yes, and how does one go about studying to be more like Naomi?"

"It's quite simple," Martha replied. "I keep a little list—actually it isn't so little. I call it 'faults that irk.' Every time Mrs. Thomas provokes or hurts me, I jot down the incident. Then I try to figure out the whys and wherefores. It's preventive medicine, a kind of guidebook for my own future use on how to avoid in-law pitfalls. Ever since I've kept my list I've become more sympathetic and more aware that Ruth, too, can be in the wrong."

I was interested, but some of Martha's friends were downright amused. "How ridiculous can you get?" they asked. "After all, Martha's children are 3, 5, and 7, better than a decade away from weddings and in-laws. Who wants to borrow tomorrow's problems today?"

I'm not sure I agree with their common-sense attitude. As a matter of fact, Martha is really the practical one, for she's trying to avoid, not borrow, problems. She's actually buying insurance for her own future happiness and that of her children.

Why are people so reluctant to understudy their mothers-in-law? Girls watch their mothers to learn how to be a wife. Boys emulate their fathers as they grow up to be husbands. Everyone is exposed to other parents long before they produce offspring of their own. But when it comes to studying an in-law, the general attitude is "Count me out. This is one relationship that is much too painful for scrutiny!"

In the Orient, this could never happen. Whether a bride likes it or not, she comes to live in her mother-in-law's home. The result is that every wife has a long period of understudying her husband's mother before she becomes "mother" to her own son's wife. "And make no mistake," a Chinese friend said to me, "that's a good way to develop understanding and tolerance."



Even in the rice villages of Japan, where the O-shuto-san (mother-in-law) often earned a reputation for cruelty toward her sons' wives, a new effort is being made to improve the relationship. Since 1951 Bright Heart Societies have cropped up all over rural Japan. Each

society has a constitution that encourages its mother and daughter-in-law members to "smile and laugh the whole day" and to "stop quarreling over whose chicken laid the egg" (the egg being the source of the housewife's pin money). To the meetings of the society members bring their complaints about each other, leaving the home peaceful and quiet for their husbands' pleasure.

But in this country we have neither a training period for mothers-in-law nor a meeting ground where the two

generations can air their gripes. We fret and fume over our coffee cups, but fail to profit from Mama's errors. We laugh at mother-in-law cartoons, jokingly envy the girl who marries an orphan, and secretly admire the Solomon Island taboo that says a married man must never lay eyes on

his wife's mother. We almost encourage her to become an outlaw when she becomes an in-law, and we accuse her of every crime from "smother love" to home wrecker. When the poor woman makes a creditable job of her difficult task, we fail to salute her. And when she flops, we frown knowingly and feel that somehow "we'll do it better."

Martha is one woman who isn't leaving her future relationships to chance. "I'm taking inventory now," she says, "before a daughter-in-law accuses me of ruining my sons, or a son-in-law chastises me for spoiling my daughters. And believe me," she adds, "inventory includes looking at Ruth as well as Naomi. Annoyed as I am when John's mother criticizes my handling of little Johnny, I'm finding that sometimes she's justified, perhaps not in the way she says it, but in what she says. I'm finding that my added insight is benefiting three generations—John's mother has a more willing audience, John's wife has a second look, and John, Jr., may be a better man."

Martha's list of "faults that irk" is a valuable legacy from her husband's mother. From it she has evolved 10 pointers on how to succeed at the delicate, difficult, but not impossible job of being a mother-in-law. Here they are, as Martha explains them:

1. Build lasting interests for a life of your own.

John's mother grew up in a generation when women tended the hearth and home. She gave her children her undivided attention, and it's painful to her to watch a younger woman assume the role that once was hers.

She feels lost and unneeded. This shouldn't happen to tomorrow's Naomi. Ingenious labor-saving appliances and greater freedom have changed women's role. Every woman today needs what Virginia Woolf called "a room of her own," a continuing interest, which is there for her now as well as later when her children have their own families.

2. Develop tact in place of the ready tongue.

John's mother feels "benched" by a woman who does things differently. She annoys me when she talks about her type of discipline, her home-baked pies. But when I stop to

think about it, I realize that she butts in, unasked, with suggestions and criticisms largely because she wants to feel needed.

If she had more interests to divert her, she wouldn't need to cling to life solely through her children. In that sense, tactfulness should come easier to our generation. When I'm honest with myself, I must admit that my resistance to her suggestions rises far too fast—that if I listened and learned (I can and should be able to do both), I might run a smoother house.

3. Encourage your children to be independent.

All of us have mixed feelings about raising children. It's sometimes hard to watch them growing away from us as they mature. It makes us feel older, less needed, a little like a deposed monarch. Actually, all of us want to raise mature men and women, and one of the worst crimes we commit is stifling the independence of our children. The do-it-yourself age in which we live should apply to child-rearing as well as house-building.

4. Be a friend, not a mother, to your children's mates.

A woman once told me that she had had a "hey, you" relationship with her mother-in-law for 40 years. "You know, Martha, I've never been able to call her Mother—she simply isn't my mother. Mrs. Riley is just too



formal. I could have called her Nettie comfortably, but she let me know early that first names were for friends and not for family. So I've stammered and 'hey-you'd' through three children and six grandchildren."

John's mother has insisted on these conventions, too. In doing so she fails to realize that children acquired through marriage can never be like her own. I can't appreciate her being maternal toward me, and I hope that someday I will remember my discomfort and will try to make my in-laws comfortable friends.

5. Be glad they're happy.

John's mother feels lost and unhappy, with the result that she fails to emphasize the positive aspects of our relationship. It would be more pleasing if she could rejoice in our happiness and take it as a compliment, for it means she has raised her son to be a good husband.

6. Give without strings, take without regret.

Generous to a fault, John's mother gives with a price—filial obligation and gratitude. This is hard to do gracefully, but it's easier than learning to take. Giving is associated with power; taking with loss of power. Parents don't enjoy accepting help from their children, but life is a story of give and take, and the trick is in being able to do both with grace.

7. Comparisons are unfair to all concerned.

John's sisters may be better homemakers than I am, but it doesn't help me to be told about their virtues. Comparisons breed antagonism not only between John's mother and myself, but between his sisters and me. We should enjoy people for what they are, not tell them what they should be.

8. Remember—two's a couple.

Divisive tactics and whispered confidences to "your own child" don't work. These barbed suggestions generally boomerang, making the divider



Like any other
difficult job,
it takes practice—
plus the application
of these 10
pointers.

very much the party of the third part.
9. Privacy is marriage's first right.

Need we say more?

10. A sense of humor helps everyone.

Perhaps this last applies more to Ruth than Naomi. When the cutting remark or the veiled hint is used, the daughter-in-law has a duty to herself and her family not to take life too seriously. A sense of humor is almost as important as a sense of taste or sight or sound.

After reading Martha's list you'll probably wonder, as I did, who on earth could live up to these principles.

"I'm sure not I," Martha laughed. "But they help me to check my anger and increase my sympathy; they remind me that one day I will be Naomi. When I am, and I fail, I will tell my daughters-in-law to make a list of my shortcomings. I may irk them in entirely different ways, but at least they will know I studied and I tried."

"And what is your idea of a successful mother-in-law?" I asked.

"I don't know," Martha answered, "but I can tell you the nicest compliment I ever heard paid to a mother-in-law. Five young housewives regularly had coffee each morning, and each day four of them would air their complaints about their mothers-in-law. Finally they asked the silent girl, 'And what about yours?'"

The girl smiled. "My mother-in-law was a great friend. She passed away recently. I miss her very much."

(Family Weekly welcomes your views on what it takes to be a good mother-in-law, in 300 words or less. Letters must be postmarked no later than midnight, March 3. If we print your letter, you will receive \$25. Letters must be signed, but names will be withheld on request. We reserve the right to edit contributions. Letters cannot be returned. Address contributions to Mother-in-law, Family Weekly, 179 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.)

