

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

En route to Gloucester for a family wedding, relishing my ritual of magazine reading, I came across an article that posed the question: *What was the best advice about life your mother gave you?* Knowing from experience that it never hurts to have an entre in your pocket when you're about to face great numbers of family and friends, I decided to do an informal survey of my own.

So, for my week in Massachusetts, visiting with friends from long ago, enjoying friends of friends and family of friends, I posed this question. These are some of my favorite responses:

- Jean, mother of the bride: There's no sense buying small bananas.
Beck: Early ripe, early rotten.
Lynn: You'll do better in any relationship if you are willing to give more than 50%.
Beverly: Always take the hypotenuse.
Father Bullock: Mind your manners.
Welly Lai: Be more patient. Be more ninja.
Scott: Don't pierce anything.
Caren: The best gift you can give your children is to love their father.
Blake: Eat an elephant one bite at a time.

From posing the question I had great conversations with people I enjoy and learned some things about them and their childhoods. Some people avoided me at the wedding, but that's the price of a good question. It's interesting how the quotes and the people fit together (you'll have to trust me on this one).

If you are really paying attention, you'll notice that the names of my own children are absent from my list of favorite responses. Yes, I did ask them. But I didn't like their answers. I gave Amy and Alison several chances and they did finally come up with ideas I could live with, but it took a while. Aaron's answer was immediate and totally not what I would want to print. Adam is still thinking.

Aside from what I think we can learn about people from their responses to such questions, I learned that my children took in different messages than I might have hoped. It's overwhelming when we really confront the truth that we are always teaching, ever role-modeling, continually sending out messages. There's no down time, no rest, no vacation from this truth. Children are watching us every minute, interpreting our behaviors as well as our words, and they are using their interpretations of these messages to build their own lives. They are assuming that the messages they receive are the messages we are sending, and they are taking action.

So what can we do? Try our best, is my best guess. And then be careful. And send out the messages we really believe in, the ones WE think are most important again and again and even again, in every way we can. My mother's best advice is this: *It's the second thank you that counts.* It's a piece of advice that has served me well in my life. But I'm sure she had to deliver it time and time again by saying it, by believing it, and, of course, by living it. Thanks, Mom.