

It was the second night of the retreat for a group of women gathered in central Oregon. The first evening had been spent unwinding and switching gears from wife-and-mother mode to just-us-girls mode. Now we were curled up cozily on couches and chairs that we had pulled close to the fireplace where a crackling fire encouraged easy conversation. The floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the fireplace exposed the darkened forest outside where silvery, full-moon shadows illuminated deep snowdrifts.

Typical of women, our conversation—regardless of the subject—circled in and out and around our families. At one point the subject of mothers-in-law came up, and there was a universal groan.

“Oh, my!” laughed one woman, “I have a mother-in-law story to end all stories!” Soon everyone was telling stories—each more outrageous than the other. Our laughter grew more raucous until we were gasping for breath.

Our hilarity was abruptly extinguished by the young woman next to me. “I wish I could laugh about my mother-in-law,” she said in a quavering voice. “I know I should love her, but the truth is—I *hate* her!” Her quiet tears escalated into uncontrollable sobs.

We quickly reached out to comfort her, and several of us tried to offer advice for dealing with her mother-in-law. As the mother of sons, I listened with sadness. Of the seventeen women present, only two had decent relationships with their mother-in-law. This didn't bode well for me!

Unfortunately, the sad statistic revealed within this small group is not unusual. In a national poll taken of women regarding their in-law relationship, seventy percent stated dissatisfaction. Their responses ranged from the extreme of "I wish she were dead" to a milder "I'm glad she doesn't visit us."

The fact that you are holding this book in your hands probably means you, too, fall within this seventieth percentile. I know I do. The disturbing aspect of this poll is that it was taken of women like you and me—decent women who were talking about other decent women. I doubt that the woman responsible for making her in-law wish her dead is an evil woman. In every other social circle she is probably well-liked, with friends and peers who think highly of her and enjoy her company. Her in-law just isn't one of them.

If we could be objective for a moment, I think most of us would admit that if we were connected to our in-law in any way other than marriage, we would have far less difficulty with her. It is the marriage connection that magnifies our differences into intolerable proportions.

Had I met my mother-in-law at work or at church, I doubt we would have butted heads. Instead, when we met, I was holding her son's hand. Twelve months later, when he and I were exchanging our wedding vows, I had no inkling that swords had just been drawn in an ongoing battle over turf that would take me to the very edge of breaking those vows. I was unprepared for the conflict that ignited as a result of my marriage to her son—or the depth of emotion it provoked on both sides.

Thirty-some years later, life brought me full circle. One morning I woke up to realize there were now two young women looking at me as I once looked at my mother-in-law.

To my surprise, things looked a bit different from this side of the equation. However, I was determined not to get caught up in the same conflict with them that I'd experienced with my mother-in-law.

In preparation for this book I interviewed countless women about their relationships with their mothers-in-law or daughters-in-law. I discovered that almost without exception the women who enjoyed successful relationships with their in-laws shared one key ingredient. In each case one of the women gave a "gift" to the other woman.

For most of them, it was not given easily, but through a determination of the will. I discovered, too, that it didn't matter whether the giver was the younger or older woman. To my surprise, it didn't even seem to matter if the gift was acknowledged—in the beginning of the relationship it often was not. It just mattered that one of the women was willing to give it.

I am not sure how you came to be in possession of this book. I don't know if you found it on your own or if it was given to you by a friend who's familiar with your struggle. Maybe your in-law gave it to you! (If that's the case, I would dearly love to have a cup of coffee with you so I could hear the rest of *that* story.) Nonetheless, however you got it, I'm glad you did. As you turn the pages you will meet many other women who know exactly how you're feeling. Some have chosen to embrace their misery. Others, and I suspect you're one, are ready to disarm the conflict, for your own sake and for your family's sake.

It's because of my daughters-in-law, Isabella and Margarita, that I wrote this book. When they came into my life I made the decision—*determined in my heart*—that I would avoid the devastating conflict with them that I experienced with my mother-in-law. Whatever it took, I would never make them feel as though swords had been drawn and sides must be taken. I purposed that, with God enabling me, I would develop a relationship of mutual respect and affection with both young women.

For the most part it's been easy. Other times, in complete innocence, I have overstepped my bounds and had to do some fast backpedaling. It's these times that elicit unexpected empathy for my mother-in-law, an emotion I never expected to feel. But I remain resolved to be the one to give the gift—to my mother-in-law and to my daughters-in-law.

Whether you are reading this as the mother-in-law or the daughter-in-law, I promise you, if you are willing to take on the challenge of being the one to give the gift, you can develop a peaceable relationship with the "other woman" in your life. And I speak from experience when I say the result will be well worth the effort