

Face of the New

Last time we unveiled a new design for MODERN MATURITY, and since then we've received a flood of mail singing its praises (see "Letters," page 8). Not all

have been raves, however. Some readers were puzzled by the photo of the design team. "I note not a single gray hair," wrote one reader. "Do you not have a generation gap?"

You'll be pleased to learn that two of our newest staff members sport the gray chic look: deputy editor Steve Slon and design director Eric Seidman. Steve's background includes stints as editor-in-chief of *Success* and managing editor of *Men's Health*, and as a writer for such magazines as *TV Guide*, *Men's Journal*, and *Travel & Leisure*. Eric's vita is no less impressive: The former art director of *Money* and *Discover*, he has won awards for his design work at *The New York Times*, *The Virginian-Pilot*, and other newspapers.

Two other key additions to the staff are the Web team's editor Rick Bowers and managing editor Beth Rhodes.



The newcomers: Rhodes, Seidman, Slon, and Bowers

This month Rick and Beth, who worked together at ThirdAge

Media before joining AARP, are launching a new, improved MODERN MATURITY site (www.modernmaturity.org), loaded with polls, games, and other interactive features. Some highlights related to current stories: an expanded guide to global life ("Strangers in Paradise," page 66), a forum on Pearl Harbor ("Historic Error?" page 22), and an interactive hospital bill to help you outsmart the bean counters ("Shock Treatment," page 76). "We're creating an online home for the magazine that puts you, the reader, in control," says Rick. "You'll be able to comment on issues and engage with the magazine in a way you've never done before."

Did I mention that there's a spot on the site where you can tell us what you think of the magazine? Let 'er rip. But no more bad-hair jokes, please.

Hugh Delebanty
Hugh Delebanty, Editorial Director



Inside Story



The stunning portraits of Harry Belafonte in this issue were taken by New York photographer Gregory Heisler (left). "Belafonte has an amazing grace and elegance," he says. "I set up my camera in front of this striking painting of him in his apartment (see page 56), and he posed his ass off. He enjoyed looking formidable."

Deborah Tannen, the author of "Mom's the Word" on page 62, was relaxed when she posed with her mother, Dorothy. Her article, adapted from her forthcoming book, *I Only Say This Because I Love You*, deciphers the secret language of mothers. "Doing this book I developed a lot of compassion for my oldest sister," says Tannen. "She was forced into a mother-like role—and I resented her for it. That's the thing about mothers. You expect them to do everything, and then you get angry at them when they do. They just can't win."

You're wearing

that?



she thinks

I don't know

what to

do

about

it



mom's

Doris, 63, is standing in the closet of her hotel room, surveying the clothes she brought along on this visit to her parents. Each time she reaches for an outfit, she draws her hand back, as she hears her mother's voice in her ear: "You're wearing THAT?" This was her mother's reaction to what she wore on each of the previous three days, and the echoes are still reverberating. All the clothes that seemed perfectly fine when she packed them now appear shabby, ill-shaped, inappropriate. Paralyzed, she is unable to choose any outfit at all. The lesson is clear: No matter how old we are, even when we are almost old ourselves, our mother's disapproval causes pain (which can easily turn to anger).

The flip side of this is that children are the source of

A crucial step in breaking the gridlock of frustrating conversations is learning to separate the message, or word meaning, from the *metamessage*—the unstated but powerful meaning that comes not only from the words spoken in the conversation at hand but also from the history of our relationships in the family. Metamessages tell us what we think is really going on—what we are doing (and what we perceive the other person is doing) in saying these words in this way at this time. You might say that the message communicates word meaning, but the metamessage yields heart meaning.

I asked Marge, a woman with grown children, about her parents. She responded with half a dozen examples of her mother's never-ending criticism. I could tell by the swiftness

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Decoding the
most important
relationship in your life

mothers' woes. Mothers complain that their children don't pay enough attention to them, don't do things right, and are hypersensitive, so the mother feels, "I can't even open my mouth." The same themes show up in grown children's complaints about mothers, but with the focus reversed: Mothers are too demanding, too meddling, and above all, too critical—even (or especially) when they protest, "I only say this because I love you."

It's easy to see one or the other perspective, depending on whom you're talking to and who you are. The hard part is keeping both perspectives in mind at once. Yet it's essential to do so in order to avoid the hurt that results as mothers and their adult children struggle to find the balance between the intertwined desires for connection, approval, and control.

with which Marge offered these remembered conversations that she had told them to others many times over. All these recollected comments had the same implication: Her mother was very critical of Marge's appearance.

Marge's mother would say, for example, "Why don't you ask Sally where she gets her shoes? They're very attractive." (Implication: Your shoes are unattractive. Sally knows how to shop and dress; you don't.) The post office was her mother's ally: Clippings arrived with pictures of women and recommendations such as, "This is how young women are wearing their hair now. I think it would look good on you." (Implication: Your hair is a mess; you're out of touch with the fashion.) Visiting her mother several weeks before her mother's death, Marge received a rare

word

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compliment: "I see you've finally lost your butt." But the very next day, when Marge appeared wearing a different skirt, her mother took the approval back: "I see now it was an illusion."

Marge's husband once tried to explain to his mother-in-law why her remarks were hurtful to Marge. "From your point of view," he acknowledged, "you are just giving helpful advice. But Marge hears it as evidence you think she's doing everything wrong." "That's right!" her mother agreed. "She takes everything as criticism."

Marge and her mother were caught in the web of confusion created when message and metamessage are not distinguished. Marge's mother—like many parents—was focused on the message level: "I just said you'd look good in this haircut. Why are you getting so upset?" Marge heard the metamessage: "I don't think your hair looks good the way it is. I don't think you are attractive." And in an ongoing relationship—which every family relationship is—any comment draws meaning not only from the current context but from a long history of comments that define the relationship, like barnacles on a rock that cannot be scraped off. Because Marge had had years of evidence that her mother disapproved of her appearance, she was primed to interpret any new comment as yet another criticism to add to the list.

Ironically, Marge's mother probably felt just as powerless: She could see all these ways her daughter could make herself more attractive, and Marge simply refused to do them. It was probably this feeling of powerlessness that made her so relentless—and made her feel she could not afford to waste a moment to help Marge improve. Also, ironically, making helpful comments about her daughter's appearance made her feel closer to Marge, but the comments immediately pushed them further apart as Marge reacted with hurt and anger.

We hold these nuggets of hurt like

family heirlooms: bits of conversation in which our parents' disapproval was set like a birthstone in a ring. We clutch them to our hearts, where the edges can continue to scrape, but also so we can show them off, to communicate, encapsulate, the hurt we know we felt.

Many tales of parents' criticism come from the teenage years, when our parents' disapproval reflects our own fears that we will not make the grade in the outside world. That is why our parents' comments so easily bring back the anguish of those years. That is also why many adults become like children when they return to their par-



ents' or grandparents' homes. A woman I know, who is so firm and supercompetent that she intimidates me, once commented that despite having told her mother innumerable times over the years that she has become a vegetarian, her mother continues to serve her meat. Surprised, I asked, "What do you do?" I was even more surprised by her reply: "I eat it of course. What can I do? She's my mother." Tough as she is in the world outside, when she goes back home she is once again a child subject to the authority of her mother.

Grown men are subject to their mothers' authority as much as women. Aaron is 55. His 85-year-old mother is visiting. Aaron is preparing dinner, and his mother is

keeping him company in the kitchen. As they talk, he reaches into the pot and pinches a string bean between his fingers, raising it to his mouth to taste. Thwack! His mother slaps his hand. Telling this story, Aaron laughs and says, "She knows what's right and what's wrong, and that was wrong." I responded, "And you laughed, of course." He paused, so I gave him another choice: "Or did it make you angry?" "I laughed about it later," he said. "At the time it made me angry."

But what's the view from the other side of judgment and advice? Why are parents so eager to set their children straight? For one thing, mothers realize that their parenting is always under scrutiny.

Even strangers feel free to approach and talk to parents, especially mothers, and to offer advice on how better to care for their children. A young mother standing in a checkout line was told by a stranger, "Your baby is too fat. Why don't you watch what you feed him?" Such judgments can trigger genuine self-doubt. One mother who frequently got advice like that began to worry whether her baby was overweight—at the age of six months—simply because she had those bulging

cheeks many babies are born with.

The knowledge that they will be blamed for their children's failures gives urgency to mothers' determination to improve their children. They are attuned to the metamessage—what this says about the kind of parent they have been. One of the biggest challenges to mothers of grownup children is trying not to feel responsible for every move their adult children make.

Middle-class American mothers often feel they are expected to be the sole sentry in a 24-hour watchtower. One mother was distraught when she heard her teenage daughter's voice on a cell-phone voice-mail message: "Mom. I'm at the hospital. We had an accident. We're all fine. But call me! Right now! Why don't

you have your cell phone on?" In an essay in *Newsweek*, the mother, Nicole Wise, notes that after recovering from her initial "self-flagellation and guilt-wallowing," she realized that having her cell phone on would not have prevented the accident. She had incurred her daughter's wrath by being unavailable to her for an hour. Thanks to the new technology, she was "supposed to be instantly reachable and immediately responsive every moment of the day and night."

Mothers are often taken for granted in this way precisely because they are working so hard to accomplish so much. Linguist Shari Kendall had a family tape record four dinner conversations and was able to capture some of the many roles the mother embodied, including head chef, caretaker, teacher, moral guardian, social secretary, manager—to name but a few. By contrast, the father performed only two roles at dinner, Conversation-alist with his wife and Play-mate with his daughter.

Comparisons are often at the heart of hurt. Knowing they are often passed over, mothers can overreact to any remark that hints their children undervalue them. One mother was in a car with her teenage son, Andy, who was talking about how much he liked his friend's mother, Mrs. Harris. As Andy spoke, his mother began to squirm: Irrational jealousy was seeded and began to grow. Did he think Mrs. Harris was a better mother than she? Her discomfort blossomed when he said, "Mrs. Harris is the sweetest woman in the world." "What am I?" his mother blurted out. "Chopped liver?" Andy looked at her with genuine puzzlement. He was talking about Mrs. Harris. Who said anything about her?

This is such a common response that the Turkish language has a fixed expression to allay people's fears. Anyone who praises someone who is not there is likely to add *Sizden iyi olmasın*—"May she/he not be better than you"—to reassure the person who is there. Because English does not have this sensible expression, Andy didn't

think to say anything to reassure his mother, who heard her son praising Mrs. Harris in a way that seemed to exclude her.

We all compare ourselves to others in our minds, making lists of attributes and giving ourselves checks or demerits as we rate others. When someone speaks ill of a third party (he was loud, she was petty) we privately reassure ourselves (I would not have said that; I'm not loud, I'm not petty—or, more troubling, I could have said that; I hope people don't think I'm loud or petty).

Many parents try to inspire their children to better behavior by offering good

phone only if there is some business to talk about, like a tuition payment that didn't arrive or a request for money.

Children sometimes choose to use their mothers as intermediaries in communicating with their fathers. It may not be that fathers have no wish to talk to their children; it may be that they don't know how to get into the kinds of conversations mothers have with children—especially daughters. Or perhaps they don't feel the need, knowing their wives will collect information and pass it on. One man who had two adult children—a son and a daughter—commented that he kept up with what was happening in both his children's lives through his daughter. Not only did he feel more comfortable talking to his daughter about personal matters, but so did his son.

E-mail may be changing this pattern. One woman commented that since hooking up to e-mail, she had begun "talking" regularly to her father. Here, my own experience has been similar: At 90, my father learned to use e-mail. Now I know that although I may not talk to him when I call him, I can "talk" to him on e-mail. Maybe this is because he is more at ease with e-mail than with the phone. My father is reticent in conversation but eloquent in writing, where he can

gather his thoughts and choose his words. In addition, alone at his desk on e-mail, he has the lines of communication to himself.

In the end, understanding how talk works is a first step in finding constructive ways of improving relationships. There is a gift simply in realizing you are not alone, that other families are experiencing similar conflicts, comparable strains. Beyond that, understanding the workings of conversation in a family gives you a language in which to talk about what's going on—and the tools to make changes in the relationships that are so important to our lives.

Excerpted from I Only Say This Because I Love You: How the Way We Talk Can Make or Break Family Relationships Throughout Our Lives, published by Random House. Copyright © 2001 by Deborah Tannen.



examples: other children. Usually the result is simply instilling an aversion to the child held up for comparison. The irony is that in many cases the child who provides the example does not really live up to the model either. The difference is the magnifying glass of close relationships: The parents know the other child only from outside appearances, whereas they know their own child's weaknesses from close, daily observation.

Family alignments are created in part by conversations: Who tells what to whom? In many families, the mother is Communication Central, from which all communications flow. I once asked a large class of college students whom they talk to when they call home. The vast majority said their mothers. Their fathers, they said, get on the