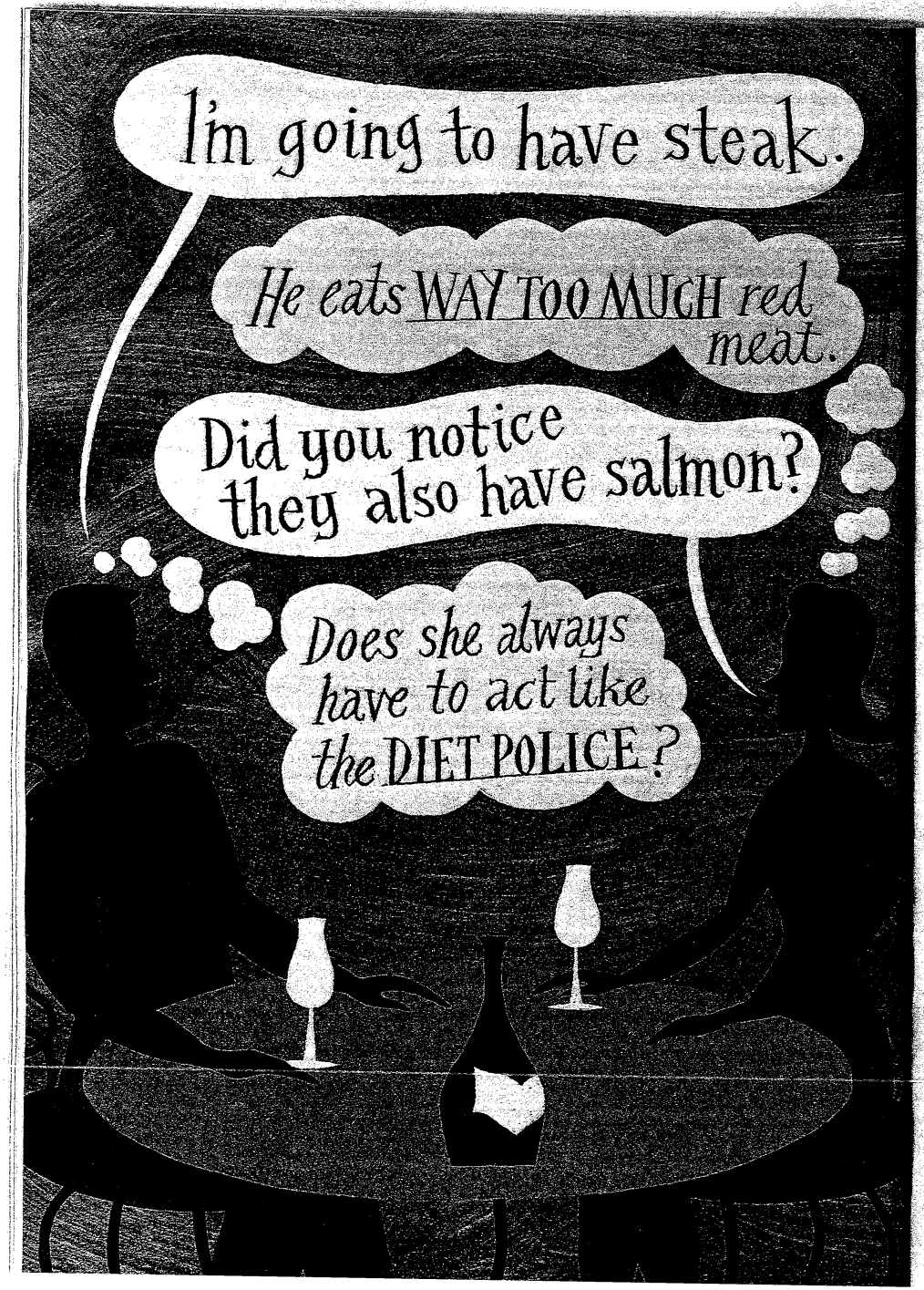

What's THAT Supposed to Mean?

How to stop your family from pushing your buttons, and how to stop pushing theirs

By DEBORAH TANNEN

From "I ONLY SAY THIS BECAUSE I LOVE YOU"

ELIZABETH, a college professor in her 30s, is making Thanksgiving dinner for her extended family in her own home. Her mother, who is visiting, is helping out in the kitchen. As Elizabeth prepares the turkey, her mother remarks, "Oh, you put onions in the stuffing?"

Feeling suddenly as if she were 16 years old again, Elizabeth turns on her mother. "Why do you have to criticize everything I do?"

"I didn't criticize," her mother replies. "I just asked a question. What's got into you? I can't even open my mouth!"

Because family members have a shared history, everything we say echoes with meanings from the past. We develop a sixth sense for sniff-

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ILLUSTRATED BY JEFFREY FISHER

ing out criticism in almost anything a loved one says—even an innocent question about the ingredients in holiday stuffing.

When family members talk to one another, there are often two meanings to what they say. The *message* is the meaning of the words and sentences spoken, what anyone with a dictionary and a grammar book could figure out. Two people in a conversation usually agree on what the message is.

The *metamessage* (the prefix *meta* means, among other things, going beyond or higher) is meaning that is not stated—at least not in so many words—but that is gleaned from every aspect of context: the way something is said, who is saying it, or the fact that it is said at all.

You might say that the message is the "word meaning," while the metamessage is the "heart meaning"—the meaning we react to most strongly, that triggers emotion.

As in the case of Elizabeth and her mother, grown children often seem to take every remark of a parent as criticism. They become attuned to any hint—any metamessage—of disapproval. Understanding this, Elizabeth's mother might refrain from offering advice or even making helpful suggestions unless asked. Sometimes, smoother family talk is a simple matter of tongue-biting.

Sometimes, however, it's more complex. The following situations show ways to stop your nearest and dearest from pushing your buttons in conversation, as well as ways to avoid pushing theirs.

Diet Police. Irene and David, a married couple from Vermont, are looking over menus in a restaurant. David says he will order a steak.

"Did you notice they also have salmon?" Irene asks.

"Will you please stop criticizing what I eat?" David protests.

"I didn't criticize," says Irene. "I just pointed out something I thought you might like."

David was reacting to what he saw as Irene's metamessage: that he eats too much red meat. It's possible that Irene really was not feeling disapproval when she pointed out the salmon on the menu. But most likely she was, and preferred to raise her concern as a question to avoid a fight.

When David reacted with annoyance, Irene cried literal meaning. Every one of us does that when we want to avoid discord. As a result, the deeper meanings of the conversation often are left unaddressed.

It might help to "metacommunicate"—that is, to talk about ways of talking. David might explain that Irene's suggestion made him feel like he was living with the diet police. If Irene actually did mean to express concern about David's health, she should admit that. By clarifying the meaning each person intended and perceived, the couple could build a bridge of understanding.

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Even though you're related, it's easy to feel like you're talking to a stranger.

"Don't Call Us ... " There is another aspect of communication complicating everything we say to each other, and it's especially powerful in families. That is our simultaneous but conflicting desires for connection and control.

We all seek connection: it makes us feel safe and loved. But being close gives family members a kind of power to control our actions that can limit our freedom and make us feel hemmed in.

"Don't tell me what to do. Don't try to control me," are frequent protests within families. It is automatic for many of us to see others' incursions on our freedom as control maneuvers. We are less likely to think of them as connection maneuvers, but they often are that too.

Nathan and Joan, a couple in their late 20s, were leaving Joan's parents after a family visit. Holding the hand of her three-year-old daughter, Joan wobbled under the weight of a pregnancy nearing its term. As everyone said their good-byes, Joan's mother, Nora, said, "I'll see you when you give birth. I can't wait to get that call when you go into labor!"

Joan and Nathan stiffened. When Joan was about to give birth to their first child, Nora and her husband drove to the couple's town so they would be close to the hospital. This had annoyed Nathan, who had expected his in-laws to wait until they were asked to come.

"We're not going to call you when she goes into labor," Nathan said to his mother-in-law. "I'll call to tell you when the baby is born."

Nora instantly protested that he had no right to keep such crucial knowledge from her. He retorted that they had the right to keep the birth private and quiet, as their daughter's birth had *not* been—because of Nora's showing up.

Nora defended herself: it had not been her idea to come ahead in that case, but her husband's. She promised to abide by any rules they set, insisting that not telling her when her daughter went into labor was too cruel an exclusion.

Nathan and Nora were both struggling to find their footing on the connection/control continuum. He was feeling an assault on his sense of control over his family, and she

Rules of Engagement

Some additional strategies to make communication with family members more loving and productive:

1. Reframe the situation: When a family member says, "I only say this because I love you," and then goes on to suggest how you can improve your life, it's easy to feel criticized. But reframing—looking at things from a different perspective—can help you focus on the metamessage of love and concern rather than judgment and disapproval.

2. Ignore sidetracks: It's easy to seize on an arguable point and run with that, even if you know it's not the main point. Stay focused on what's really important.

3. Cool it: Never sling insults, resort to name-calling or use sarcasm. This raises the heat without shedding any light.

4. Don't play Socrates: Avoid luring someone into a trap by insisting they answer questions or concede points that you think will ultimately get them to admit they were wrong. No one wants to walk down a path blindfolded. Be explicit about the endpoint you are heading for.

5. Speak for yourself: It's best not to drag in other people, as in, "Aunt Jane has noticed it too."

6. Treasure apologies: Use them if you can. But don't get so wedded to demanding an apology that the demand becomes a battering ram.

—Deborah Tannen

was feeling an assault on her sense of connection with her daughter.

But Nora was also feeling a loss of control, as if her hands would be tied at a crucial moment—and Nathan was also feeling a loss of connection, with his wife.

There are a few communication keys that would have helped them. Timing is one. Nora could have avoided putting Nathan on the defensive by making her case to be present at the birth in a calmer setting—by letter, or in a carefully thought-out conversation about how she felt and what she would be willing to promise. It probably also would have helped to say she was sorry she had come uninvited the first time.

Nathan could have avoided committing himself one way or the other about calling Nora when Joan went into labor. Then later he could just not have done it, and soothed hurt feelings by explaining, "Things happened so fast I wasn't able to call."

"Didn't I Tell You?"

Even though you're related, it's easy to feel at times like you're talking to a stranger. Age and gender differences are among the obstacles that can get in the way.

Cindy, a small-business owner, was increasingly distressed because her grown son continued living at home after graduating from college and beginning a full-time job. His upkeep was straining her tight budget.

After about three months she said to him, "I think it would be fair for you to pay rent."

He replied, "I'm leaving soon."

Cindy was relieved that she had finally spoken up and settled the matter. But time passed and no rent appeared. After several more months, her anger erupted.

During this quarrel it emerged that her son had felt that the issue of paying rent, though raised, had been left in abeyance for a little while longer. Cindy, on the other hand, had assumed that expressing her opinion implied a request for action, that all she had to do was make her wishes known and her son would feel obligated to honor them.

Her son's interpretation was similar to the way many men react to women's indirect requests. Since he himself would ask directly, he did not recognize Cindy's statement of preference as a request for action.

Because men often honestly miss indirect requests, Cindy would have done better to end her first talk with a direct statement, such as, "Then we agree you'll start paying rent next month." Or she could have finished with a question like, "When can I expect a check?"

CONVERSATION WITH OUR FAMILY is an ongoing balancing act as we try to clarify meanings that did not get across or dispel misunderstandings—and at the same time interpret what is being said to us. Staying aware of all the subtleties of family talk can give us the power to improve the most important relationships in our lives.

All names were changed to protect privacy.

rd.com To order the book this excerpt is taken from, call 800-832-2212 or purchase online at booksnow.com/rd. Does your family *really* talk? Tell us in Community Talk at our website.

DUH!

Here are the top five winning entries in this year's Wacky Warning Labels contest, sponsored by Michigan Lawsuit Abuse Watch:

"Shin pads cannot protect any part of the body they do not cover."

On a public toilet: "Recycled flush water unsafe for drinking."

"Warning: Riders of personal watercraft may suffer injury due to forceful injection of water into body cavities, either by falling into the water or while mounting the craft."

On an electric router: "This product not intended for use as a dental drill."

On a novelty rock-garden set (called Popcorn Rock): "Eating rocks may lead to broken teeth."

—ROBERT DORIGO JONES, *Michigan Lawsuit Abuse Watch*