

Hotheads in the Household

I never heard my father and mother argue. I now know they often disagreed. But they considered it bad breeding to argue in front of their children. It was an unreal world for a kid to grow up in.

There was one time ... I was about 10 years old. I woke in the middle of the night and heard my mother screaming. My older brother, Walter Jr., had come in late from a Saturday night date. My mother met him downstairs, and there was some kind of horrible confrontation.

My mother was hysterical. Her words were shrill. Unintelligible. Then I heard Walter shouting something—also unintelligible. The door slammed, shaking the entire house.

By that time, I was out of bed. From my upstairs window, I saw my brother stomping across the dark yard toward nowhere, shouting back at the house. My mother, back upstairs, was still hysterical.

I was terrified and crawled back into bed, wishing it had never happened. Through the closed bedroom door I could hear my father's calming voice, "Now, now, he'll be back."

The next morning we all gathered as usual at the breakfast table before leaving for Sunday school. Each child, including Walter, was present. Mother was bustling back and forth from the kitchen, bringing in the Cream of Wheat in the big brown serving bowl with the blue stripe around the top.

My father, sitting at the head of the table in coat and tie, had us bow for the blessing. No mention was made of the catastrophic eruption of the night before. In fact, to my knowledge, this is the first time it has ever been mentioned by anyone in 43 years.

But you have to understand, in our family children were never exposed to the parents' flaws. My children, unfortunately, were not raised in this kind of artificiality. When Jackie and I argued it seemed to be in front of everyone. That was not the way I would have chosen. I prefer to think of myself as an aristocrat rather than a common brawler.

But for some reason or another nothing in our house was private. When it came to our frequent, and sometimes explosive disagreements, well, everyone knew everything. My father (and my mother—except for that uncontrollable outburst) regarded unbridled emotion—of any kind—as bad form.

It was suggestive of a lack of Christian restraint. My wife, on the other hand, was one who believed in total exposure. No waiting until the children were asleep. No smiling nicely until we were behind closed doors.

Whenever I, by some unacceptable behavior, pushed her over her narrow threshold into the pit of frustration, she simply exploded. Right then. Earlier in our marriage I was horrified by these outbursts.

I wanted my children to think I was perfect. Husbands and wives who shouted at each other in front of their offspring, were, in my opinion, products of low breeding. Whenever I found myself in one of these domestic disagreements—and knew the children were listening in—that old terror would return.

It was the same feeling I had the night I heard my mother screaming at my brother. But Jackie did not bring these same fears into our marriage. She had not been raised in a home where domestic disagreements were hidden, where children were lied to by well-meaning parents who attempted to shield them from reality.

She was raised in a four-room house occupied by seven people from three generations. Family squabbles involved everyone. She did not fear reality. She knew love would conquer in the

end. Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying it's good for parents to fight in front of children.

Some restraint is good. Any behavior which undermines the foundations of the Christian home is simply unacceptable. But to live lives of polite smiles, lives which deny that last night's nightmare really happened, lives which are designed to hide from children (and others) the reality of disagreements, is the worst kind of hypocrisy.

Across the years, thanks to our growing relationship with God, our household has become more peaceful. We simply don't fight like we used to. Love, joy, peace, gentleness—these have replaced the sharp words and argumentative spirits of our earlier years. We've learned to listen. And respect.

Yet if I had to choose between the way of open arguments, and the way of my parents, I would choose our way. Our arguments did have one redeeming feature. Once the storm had passed, we knew God required an explanation to the children.

It was not unusual to wind up asking the children to pray for us. Thus our children have never harbored false expectations about their parents or about marriage. They've known from infancy that Mom and Dad not only disagreed, but sometimes disagreed violently. They've seen us at our worse: teeth gritted, eyes bulging, voices shouting.

They've seen me on my knees sheepishly picking up pieces of a broken bowl I had slammed against the floor. They've seen us both on our knees, before God, confessing and asking forgiveness. The bottom line: They know Mom and Dad simply can't make it without Jesus.

As a result, each child has opted to trust Him also. The five children, now grown and married, often get together at our house for a meal. When they do, the conversation invariably drifts to: "Hey, remember the time Mom..." "Yeah, and what about the time Dad..."

This will be followed by hilarious laughter as they explain to their spouses our flaws and faults. It's embarrassing. But when I hear their laughter, and I see my wife wink at me, I too, smile—and give thanks. {eo}

From 1979 until his death, Jamie Buckingham (1932-1992) wrote the "Last Word" column for *Charisma* magazine, which originally published this article. He was the editor of *Ministry Today* magazine at his untimely death in February 1992—more than 20 years ago.