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LIFE RELATIONSHIPS

# My In-Laws and I Have Nothing in Common

But instead of focusing on the differences, I made an effort to get to know them.



By Darcie Mueller

the mix

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When I married my second husband, we had never met each other's parents. I suppose that sounds bizarre, but it was the second marriage for each of us, and we purposefully kept the ceremony small, with only one witness each. A few months after the wedding we road-tripped three hours east to my husband's family home for the weekend – it was time to meet the parents!

What is it they say about first impressions? Mine was a doozy. I walked in the door and in the first 10 minutes, after the initial hellos, I counted over 40 taxidermy animals. Yep, over 80 dead eyes staring at me from all directions. I'm talking deer, various birds, and even a few squirrels. These animals weren't isolated to a game room in a large home, but were on walls, shelves and side tables in a small 1200 square foot home; they were everywhere! Although I was welcomed into my in-laws' home, I knew immediately I was going to have to channel my inner Zen master if I wanted to avoid topics where my liberal outlook would, most certainly, offend them.

My in-laws are not bad people, but it was clear we were not going to find much common ground regarding any social or political issue, whether related to gun control, immigration, gay marriage, or education policy. I quickly shifted gears and considered more neutral topics, like books or travel experiences.

That became problematic as well. They had only left their home state once, and the only reading material I saw in the house was Guns and Ammo and Harlequin romance novels. Even pop culture was a challenge, since their television used

old-fashioned rabbit ears to pick up two stations. Neither of them had ever even used a cell phone or logged into a computer. Oh my. What topics did that leave? How was I going to fill an entire weekend talking about the weather?

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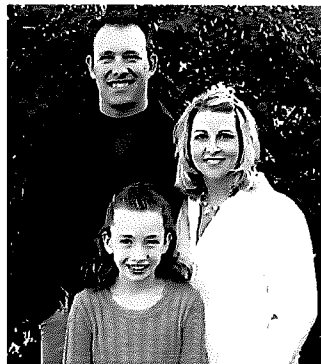
I found myself at the proverbial crossroads. I could either shutdown and start questioning my decision to marry into this family in the first place, or I could embrace the fact that I had landed in what felt like an fascinating alternate universe, and make the best of it. I chose the latter, and spent the weekend asking a lot of questions about their family history.

First, how and why were they so interested in hunting and all things gun-related? Second, what was up with the taxidermy? I found out that my father-in-law grew up believing hunting was an important life skill, similar to cooking or driving, and that my husband's great grandpa had actually owned a taxidermy business. Did you know that taxidermy is considered an art form in some countries, and that this skill traces all the way back to ancient Egyptians? Also, some of the animals in the house were handed down from generation to generation and had sentimental family value, like a quilt or antique picture frame may have value. How interesting?!

My husband and I have been married nearly 10 years now, and we still laugh about my initial reaction to his childhood home and all of those "stuffed" animals. When we visit now I do make one demand, which I actually consider a very fair compromise, which is that we get a hotel room nearby. No matter how hard I try, I just can't sleep with those eyes staring at me!

But, other than that, over the years, my in-laws and I have developed what I would describe as a comfortable relationship. We have figured out how to maneuver around controversial social and political issues, and have come to respect the fact that our individual values and opinions are well entrenched, and in many cases, unwavering. My relationship with my in-laws works because we literally have distance between us, a three hour drive. I've also focused on asking questions, then listening, so I can understand who they are.

When all else fails, I do my best to channel my inner Zen master, and remember that no matter how different we are, we do share a common love.



Darcie Mueller



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