

marry me, marry my family

By Susanna Aughtmon

marriage is a wonderful, crazy journey. Having joined yourself to the most incredible person God could have created for you, the process of intertwining your lives and merging separate pasts towards a common future is well underway. From here on out you'll cruise through the good times and four-wheel through the bad times — just the two of you. Or maybe the 12 of you. You need a few more seats in that marriage SUV because two sets of in-laws, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and maybe even a chocolate lab named Coco, are coming along for the ride.

Perhaps you made it through the entire wedding process without any family pitfalls. But there are bound to be a few hitches in your giddy-up along the happy path of newlywed-dom, if only because your spouse did not come from your family.

“Newlyweds need to prepare to distance themselves a bit from their families when they are starting out,” says Gary Bruegman, a therapist from the National Institute of Marriage in Hollister, Mo.

The focus of newlyweds should be on creating a healthy start for their marriage. Doing so can be difficult when a mother-in-law keeps popping over to starch her son's shirts or a dad can't stop calling to check in on his little girl. There is good reason the Bible instructs marriage partners to “leave and cleave.” The new marriage needs some room to grow strong.

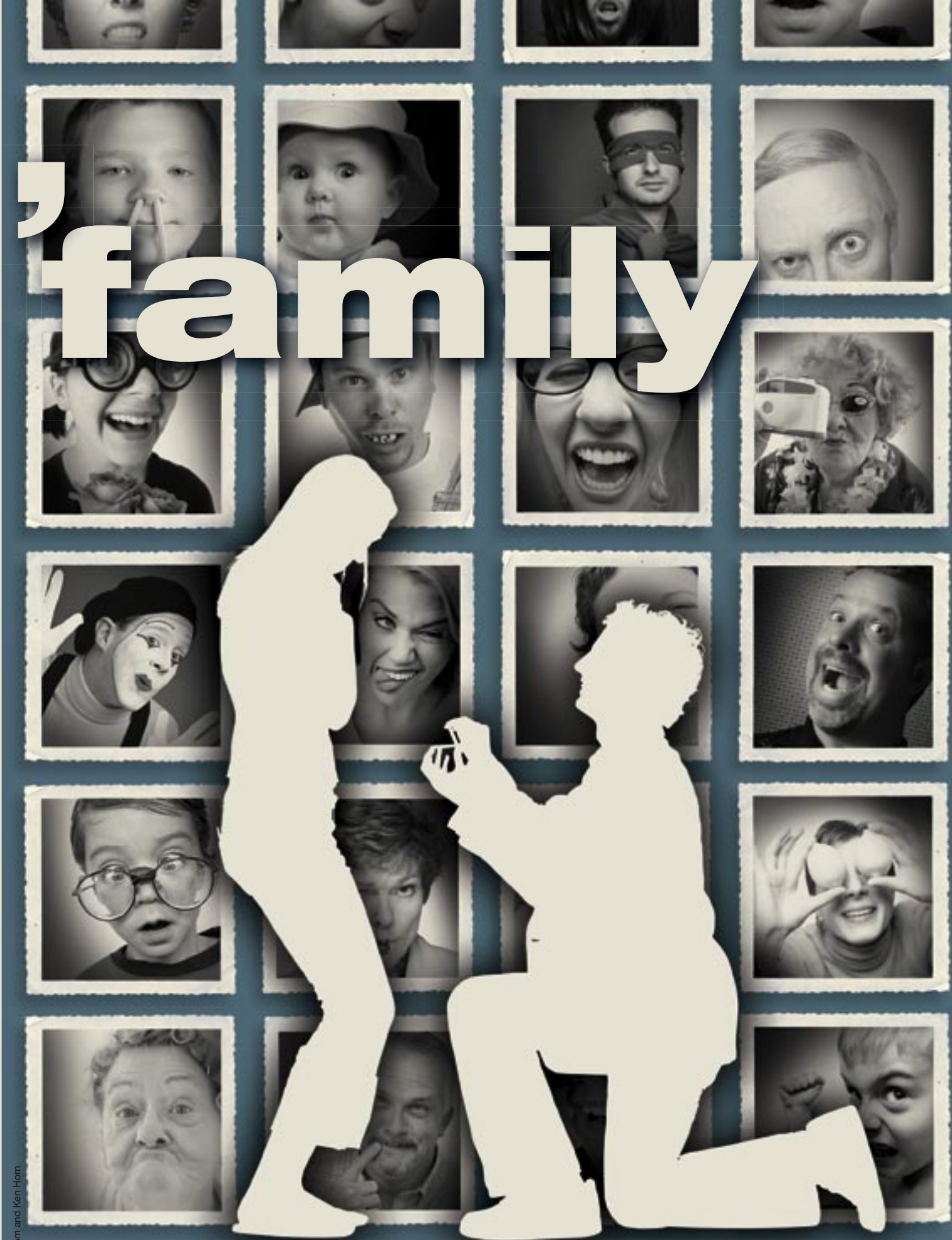
Around the world, newlyweds face adjustments in the new family roles they find themselves in. In India, a new wife moves in with her husband's family, aiding the mother-in-law in running the household. One Chinese proverb states, “A son-in-law may perform one half of the duty of a son, but a daughter-in-law must do twice as much duty as a daughter.” In Italy, men who have a hard time cutting the apron strings are called *mammoni* or “mama's boys.”

Some experts suggest the newlywed should view his or her journey with the new in-laws as a cross-cultural experience, complete with the expectation of miscommunication, different customs and even exotic food. Robin Williams Aladeen, a therapist from Williams Counseling Group in San Francisco, notes that when a person marries, he or she won't always take the time to learn the stories and rules of the way life works in their in-laws' world.

Neglecting to do so could strain relationships.

For instance, a newlywed might run into a language barrier when her mother-in-law invites her over for dinner, saying, “Just drop in

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sometime between 6 and 6:30.” She really means, “You have a 10-minute window somewhere between 5:55 and 6:05 to arrive or else.”

Your interpreter — also known as your spouse — is your key to helping you understand the new language and nuances that come with your new family.

Case in point are holiday traditions.

My husband, Scott, experienced something akin to shock and awe during his first Christmas with my family. He was floored when we burst out singing “Joy to the World” before opening gifts.

Every person sang. Except Scott. He sat, stunned, gripping the edges

of his folding chair as parents, siblings and I played off of each other’s harmonies, melding into a fantastic Broadwayesque finale.

“What was that?” he whispered over his unopened present.

“What? We always sing before presents,” I shrugged.

Scott didn’t realize a Von Trapp family Christmas was my family culture. I would have been equally stunned if his family expected me to perform in an all-family-clog on St. Patrick’s Day.

Then there is the issue of exotic food. As in most foreign cultures, your new family could become offended if you don’t eat what they put before you. My sister, Erica, had fair warning. A

co-worker took her aside before she left for her first Thanksgiving with her in-laws, saying, “You know the mashed potatoes won’t be the same, right?”

“What?” she answered, a little confused.

“The mashed potatoes,” said her friend, “they won’t taste the same as they do in your family.”

Who would think texture and butter content mattered so much? Erica’s friend was right.

Being the savvy woman she is, Erica offered to bring the potatoes the next year. A nice move, as she earned daughter-in-law points along with the honor of being mashed-potato-contributor-extraordinaire to this day.

Maybe your Thanksgiving favorite is the green bean casserole with crunchy onions. You might want to call ahead — right now — and offer to bring it. Just in case.

So where does this leave you? Is paradise lost at the end of the honeymoon? Must the marriage sojourn be full of family pot-holes?

Absolutely not!

Remember, you and your in-laws have one huge thing in common. You both love the person you are married to.

“In-laws deserve to be valued, as they are responsible for the person you fell in love with,” Bruegman says. “They can

provide you with a great deal of strength and encouragement because no one knows your husband’s or wife’s weaknesses better than they do.”

“They know your partner from a different vantage point than you do,” adds Williams Aladeen. “By asking questions, you can learn to appreciate the history they bring to your present-day relationship.”

Strong family relationships take time. My friend, Stephanie, has traveled a bumpy road with her in-laws. Yet years of hard work have grown them together. This year she received an anniversary day card from her in-laws saying, “No son could make me happier

and no daughter could be dearer than you.”

Stephanie carries the card with her every day. Love that is hard-won means that much more. And love from and for your spouse’s family, is something that can hem you in, front and back, as you begin the marriage journey. **tpe**

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