

# The best advice I was ever given...

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All of us are familiar with various “parlor games” people pursue, usually at a family holiday gathering; or, there is a relative who loves to ask leading questions and insist that everyone in the room respond. Often it is a very personal question. In our case, the bedeviling family member is my 12-years-younger sister, Linnea.

We call them “Linny Questions.” And often they are not necessarily easy ones to answer. I surprised her though when she asked the classic: “what was the best advice I was ever given or wished had been given to me?”

She probably thought her aging, pretentious brother would cite something from his favorite author, Joseph Conrad, or something from poet Rudyard Kipling’s “If,” but I didn’t.

The best advice I was ever given and glad I took was: “When you think you want to get married, be sure and take a good look at your prospective mother-in-law because more than likely that’s your wife in 20 years. If you like what you see, you’ll know you will still like your wife in 20 years and you’re making a good choice. If you don’t like what you see, run like hell the other way!”

Unfortunately, I cannot recall who gave me such wise counsel, but what’s important is I followed it. Forty-one years later I still like what I see. I couldn’t have found a better mother-in-law, and indeed my wife has become more like her which leaves me doubly blessed.

MaryLou Andersen, my widowed mother-in-law, is one of the most exceptional people I’ve ever met and had the pleasure of knowing. She radiates love for her children and grandchildren, is the picture of grace and wisdom even when stressed, internalized the right values long ago, reflects moral rectitude and compassion all at the same time.

Late last month, she reached another milestone in growing gracefully, even as she contends with the growing debilitations and limitations of late life Parkinson’s disease onset (a malady we share). Let’s just say she passed 70 a while back, but shows little sign of slowing down. I swear she is the energizer bunny personified. Whether she is tending to her garden, or quilting with her good friend, Dorothy, or attending an evening of the card game bunco, she’s constantly in motion.

I get tired just watching her.

I swear too all telephone lines lead to her house. She knows everyone and is frequently

on the phone dispensing sound advice and pearls of wisdom. She is the soul of discretion, however, so folks who call know she is completely trustworthy---a key to remaining at the center of an information network.

Her eight surviving children rightly adore her, as do their spouses. She often calls each son-in-law her “favorite” which just reflects what a naturally savvy politician she is.

She also doesn't mince words or sugar coat tough messages. This year on April Fool's Day, she badly suckered Marcia and me, calling and telling us a weather balloon had fallen down just a short ways from our house. We all went rambling to the door to try and see it before the wind blew it away! Gotcha!

So I gave it some thought and knew how to pull her chain. Without even mentioning it to my wife on the way to Church the next morning I casually said “Mary Lou, what would you think if I were to file for the Kootenai School Board position against Mitch Donohoe?”

“Oh, Chris. I wouldn't advise it. First you'd lose the race because Mitch has done a good job and deserves to be re-elected. Secondly, I wouldn't even vote for you.”

Now, I really started to have fun. “Mary Lou, I'm sure an ad with a statement of support from you in the paper would carry a lot of weight. You mean you won't even lend me your name?” Back came the answer. “Nope and I'm sorry that you've filed without even talking to me.”

At this point I let my clearly uncomfortable m-i-l off the hook, by smiling and saying “April Fool's!” She smiled weakly and I knew I'd come dangerously close to losing her love and loyalty by pulling her chain a bit hard.

And did the daughter ever act like the mother, decisively letting me know what the consequences would be if I undertook to seek an elective position anywhere, any time. Years back, I asked her what she would do if I ever filed for public office. Marcia looked me square in the eye and said “The day you file, I file.” Like mother, like daughter. I knew Marcia wasn't saying she'd be filing to run against me.

So I do my best to stay on Mary Lou's good side. She's earned the respect and devotion of all those who know her and she fills the role of family matriarch superbly.

Rather than whistle or sing the dirge-like song from years back called “Mother-In-Law” with its opening line of “the worst person I know” and the back up group crooning “mother-in-law,” I instead sing a few bars of the old Ricky Nelson hit: “Hello, Mary Lou, good bye heart, sweet Mary Lou I'm so in love with you. . . .” and your oldest daughter.

I'm very blessed. So here's a happy birthday wish for many more from your favorite son-in-law to his favorite mother-in-law. Happy birthday, GranmaLou.”

A native of Kellogg, a former teacher at Kootenai, and a former journalist, Chris Carlson served as press secretary to former Idaho Governor Cecil D. Andrus for ten years. He is the founding partner of the Gallatin Group, is now retired and he and his wife, Marcia, reside at Medimont.