

# Olive Kitteridge

Dale Easley's Blog

20 August 2015

*Over the summer, several of us at the University of Dubuque read **Olive Kitteridge** for discussion this week during Faculty Days. I also watched the [HBO mini-series](#) based on the book. During our discussion, I was once again reminded that what I thought was a normal upbringing was unfathomable to some people.*

I come from a long line of hillbillies, alcoholics, and the mentally ill. Multiple relatives have been committed to mental institutes, committed suicide, committed adultery, committed to a losing hand, and failed to meet family commitments. It's almost funny that one of the personal-development courses I took focused on making and keeping commitments. My family was probably not what they had in mind. Still, with therapy, friendship, and professional support, I've mostly come to peace with my upbringing, sometimes even being proud of what I've come from. Certainly, it has shaped who I am.

I suppose it's no surprise that I believe that the most important part of moving on from ones past is education. I'm a teacher, after all. I don't think we have much freedom to choose between alternatives if we don't know that we have alternatives. Education helps us examine our lives critically and learn new ways of doing things. For example, I never realized that my behavior could be influenced by my grandfather's drinking until years after he was dead. How could this old guy who died when I was so tiny that I can't even remember him still keep influencing my life 30 years later? However, when I picked up **Grandchildren of Alcoholics**, it seemed like my autobiography. (See [An Unhealthy Loop](#)). So many patterns in my life were not uniquely mine but were being repeated in countless others. Fortunately, in some cases, those patterns were being broken. That provides hope.

One way of creating beautiful music is to take a theme and produce variations upon it. A way to create a dysfunctional life is to take a bad pattern and produce endless variations upon it. The daughter of an alcoholic marries another alcoholic. And another. Abuse follows abuse. This time it's going to be different. But it isn't. A definition of insanity I like is doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different outcome. Maybe if I try harder...

Recognizing the pattern is tough. Breaking the pattern is tougher. Few of us can do it on our own. As I've written about [elsewhere](#), a therapist can help. Unfortunately, seeking help is too often seen as shameful—one of my aunts took my uncle out of the mental hospital for that reason, though she herself was an

alcoholic. (He subsequently lived in the old family home for decades, shooting at uninvited visitors.) Many of my colleagues feel unprepared for dealing with our students sometimes-severe problems. We don't have to cure them listening, not judging, and supporting them in getting professional help can be a great contribution.

I've been very fortunate to have friends who listen well and accept me, at times when I can't accept myself. My wife has stuck by me through loads of my crap. My two daughters are amazingly sane and seemingly happy. Not surprisingly, my older daughter plans to study psychology in college. Before she took Abnormal Psychology, I told her that she would have plenty of material for class projects with just our family. And throughout my 25 years in the college classroom, my life has been constantly enriched by the many wonderful students who've talked with me outside class, forgiven my shortcomings, and shared their joys. John Kavanaugh said it better:

Our sadness is as much a part of our  
lives as is our laughter.  
To share our sadness with one we love is  
perhaps as great a joy as we can know—  
unless it be to share our laughter.