



Commentary Transcript: *Big Little Lies*

Clip 4: Season 1, Episode 1

This scene takes place after the emotionally charged dinner scene we talked about in Commentary 3. Madeline is approaching Abigail to talk about college. Abigail doesn't plan to attend, and Madeline is trying to convince her to make a different choice. Here's the scene.

[PLAY SCENE]

Madeline isn't being mindful of her tone and word choice here. She's also not approaching Abigail with the softness appropriate after their difficult interaction earlier. Mom is coming at this in a way that will only entrench their positions; not create understanding or bring them closer.

Let's break this down.

PAUSE: "You're going to college."

This interaction is not starting off well. The directive, "You're going to college" isn't the same as approaching Abigail with curiosity.

The tone of, "You're going to college" might be the same tone you'd use to tell a young child, "No, you can't have a cookie."

Mom's approach is setting up this interaction as verbal combat. The only answer Abigail will give is an explanation of why she *doesn't* have to go to college. The battle of wills is on.

PAUSE: "And dad, he never went and he seems perfectly happy in life...career-wise."

If Madeline stopped to translated what Abigail is saying, it might have sounded something like, "I know at least two fully functional adults who didn't go to college. They've shown me that a degree is not the only route to stability or success."

But, Mom doesn't follow Abigail's lead to learn more about Abigail's idea of success, or what she wants in her future. She's here to *convince* Abigail, not to talk about Abigail's perspective.

Madeline also puts pressure on Abigail to notice, and compensate for, her feelings while not doing the same for Abigail. Her reaction to Abigail's statement that Madeline's ex-husband is "happy in life" creates a moment where Abigail feels compelled to qualify her statement because she knows that her father being "happy in life" does not please her mother. It's almost as if Abigail has insulted her mother by insinuating that her father should be happy.



Madeline has missed an opportunity to focus on Abigail's perspective, and she's going to double down on her incurious and combative approach as we continue here.

PAUSE: "...Her little cup just runneth over with happiness, doesn't it?

A couple of things here...First, if there is any doubt that Mom hates—or at least seriously resents—Bonnie, Mom's vocal tone and facial expression confirm it right here.

Second, she's doing what she did in the dinner scene in Commentary 3. She's bringing her negative feelings about Bonnie into the mix when it's harmful to put tensions related to your marriage or divorce onto the shoulders of your children. Abigail knows that she needs to tip toe around her Mom's feelings about her ex-husband and Bonnie. That's an adult-level responsibility that Abigail will speak to in the next section.

But, before we go there, a question...What if Bonnie's cup *did* run over with happiness? Would that be a bad thing? What is Mom trying to tell Abigail here? That she resents Bonnie's happiness? That says more about Madeline than it does about Bonnie.

PAUSE: "I don't hate Bonnie."

Madeline missed an opportunity here. She doesn't do a good job managing her feelings about Bonnie and it comes out in a lot of ways that Abigail has noticed. Denying Abigail's statement suggests that Abigail has it wrong; that she's somehow misinterpreted Mom's venom, when that's not true.

If Mom were being honest and a little more skillful, she might have said something like, "You're right. I react poorly when Bonnie comes up. I'm jealous that your dad is so happy with her and that she is so radiant. I wanted him to be happy with me. And I apologize, that's mine and I shouldn't be broadcasting my feelings about her. That's not fair to you." Instead, she gaslights Abigail, suggesting that Abigail isn't seeing things clearly.

PAUSE: "This is about you, Abigail, and your future."

Another gaslighting moment here. We saw Mom bristle in a way that Abigail feels compelled to clarify her dad's happiness is, "career-wise." We saw Mom's expression and heard her tone when she went off about "Bonnie's cup running over with happiness." How is this about Abigail? Mom has brought her own stuff into the room and Abigail knows this conversation is not about *her*; it's about Mom trying to make Abigail see things her way.

PAUSE: "...can be a much more holistic equation."

If this were real life, and Mom was curious and paying attention, she could have recognized that Abigail is throwing out a thread here. Mom could have pulled on that thread to understand Abigail's perspective.



Abigail is stating what she wants—a balanced existence not too focused on career or money. If she wanted to understand, Mom could have asked a few different questions here. Such as...

- Do you have some ideas about what you might want to do with your time and energy?
- Do you see a career as naturally existing separately from your “life”?
- If you could make a career out of doing something that made you feel like “You” how would you put your heart and skills into the world?
- Even better, she might have recognized the clarity with which Abigail conveyed her feelings. That might be something like, “You articulated that thought really well, Abigail. What metric would *you* use to define success?” That would put the focus on Abigail and give her a chance to voice her thoughts. Then, this would be a conversation—not another interaction where Madeline wants to be heard but doesn’t grant that right to the person she’s talking at.

PAUSE: “Have to be independent and you have to be self-sufficient.”

Madeline is super dedicated to making Abigail see things her way. Even though her tone is softening here, she’s continuing to prove to Abigail that the only right answer is agreeing with her.

Abigail is questioning the value of traditional education when there might be other ways to earn a living that feel more balanced. She’s young, so she doesn’t yet understand the value of Mom’s experience. In 20 years, she might. But not tonight.

If this were real life, Mom might have landed a more solid point by being sincere. She could have said something like, “I learned the hard way that you can find yourself in a really difficult position if you don’t have a skill that someone will pay you for. I would never want you to feel as desperate and scared as I did when I realized that I had no one to rely on and I wasn’t self-sufficient. That’s why I’m so intent on you going to college, Abigail. I want it to be easier for you than it was for me.” She would still be *telling* Abigail instead of asking about Abigail’s perspective, but at least she would be less directive and more genuine.

PAUSE: “...Poof in your face.”

Here, we can revisit the line when Mom said, “This is about you, Abigail, and your future.” Because we haven’t yet talked about Abigail. Mom is making her pitch based on her *own* life experience.

If she were paying attention, she might see that saying, “The best laid plans can go poof” could be *proving* Abigail’s point. The best laid plans *can* explode... like thinking that everything will be fine if you just get a college degree. The future is not guaranteed. Mom wants to arm Abigail against uncertainty with education but Abigail wants a more balanced existence, which *she* might think is the best protection against a future that cannot be predicted.



An option Mom had here might have been taking the sincere approach again and stating her wish for Abigail. That might sound something like, “We never know what the future holds. We make plans, we do the best we can, and then life can take a turn. What’s most important to me is that you’re able to adapt to whatever comes. I think that having a college degree will help you to achieve financial stability but I see you’re that you’re talking about something bigger than money or a career. I’ll stop focusing on my perspective now. Let’s talk more about what you want for yourself.”

PAUSE: “...remind me of a space alien right now, you know that?”

Abigail isn’t absorbing anything positive from this conversation. It’s proving to her that her mother is unreasonable, and more interested in telling Abigail how to manage her future than listening to what Abigail wants for herself and helping her achieve it.

Here, Mom might have said something like, “You’re a strong young woman and I think you can learn to handle whatever happens. I also think that, to be independent, you need to make enough money to support yourself. That’s hard to do consistently if you don’t build a career. Do you have ideas on how you might make a living if you *don’t* go to college?”

PAUSE: Abigail swats Mom’s hand away and says, “No.”

Madeline has alienated Abigail through this conversation. She looks surprised at Abigail’s rejection of her loving gesture. But I’m wondering, what about this interaction made Mom think that it left Abigail open to intimate touch? Abigail hasn’t said anything that indicates that she feels heard or cared for. I’m guessing that she’s feeling bulldozed and misunderstood.

Mom had at least one other option here. Assuming everything had gone as the scene was written, Madeline might have responded to Abigail’s rejection by softening her tone, calming her energy, looking Abigail in the eyes, and saying something like, “Obviously I feel strongly about this and I respect that you have your own perspective. Please know that I say these things because I love you, and I want you to have a really great life. My life was limited by a lack of education, and I want you to have more options than I did. I apologize that I didn’t do very well listening to you. Let’s give this topic a break for now, but I would like hear more about your plans and I’ll try harder to understand where you’re coming from.”

Let’s take a minute to rewrite this scene to be something that may work better in real life. We won’t change the tension in Madeline and Abigail’s relationship, we’ll just alter Madeline’s approach.

I’ll start with Madeline, who enters the room with the intention of encouraging Abigail to consider college but also with genuine curiosity about Abigail’s perspective.

Madeline: Hey, can we talk for a minute?



Abigail: (Reluctantly) Sure.

Madeline: I know you're not planning on going to college and it makes me wonder, what do you think you'll do after graduation?

Abigail: I'm not sure yet. I'm thinking about ways I can make a positive impact on the world.

Madeline: I can see that; you've always had such a kind and caring heart. (Pause) You know that I was a young mother, and I don't regret it. But, because I didn't go to college, my options in life have been more limited than they would have been otherwise. I want something better for you and I think education can help you meet your goal of making an impact on the world.

Abigail: I get that, but this isn't about you. What about what I want?

Mom: What do you want?

Abigail: I want to be independent, and self-sufficient, doing things that resonate with who I am and what I love. I want a life that's bigger than just a career or a paycheck.

Mom: That makes sense and I hear that you're still considering your options. I'd be happy to talk about ideas you that come up with and how you can turn them into reality. Before you make a decision, will you please do one thing?

Abigail: Fine, what? (Bracing to be bulldozed)

Madeline: (Reassuringly) This isn't about getting a degree, but identifying options that you might want to pursue. I want you to go online and look through some college course catalogs to see if any of the classes pique your interest. Maybe that can help direct your thought process, or maybe taking a few classes could help you explore ways to put your heart into the world. I want you to *be able* to build the life you want—where you get to do the work you love, and make an impact, even if you don't have a degree.

Abigail: Yeah, OK. I'll do that.

A few more thoughts on this exploration...

Talking *with* someone can build connection and trust. Talking *at* them can damage connection and trust by demonstrating that all you care about is your opinion. That doesn't feel very loving or connective to the person you're bulldozing. Teenagers are at a developmental stage where it's crucial to build an identity that they can base their futures upon. They want adults to see them as individuals and recognize their uniqueness.



Parents can support identity development by reflecting on the abilities and interests their child has expressed across their early life. By talking about what which parts of themselves they most want to express, parents can help teenagers figure out what they want out of life and why, what fits and what doesn't.

Teenagers are, by definition, not adults. They'll have ideas that won't roll up into complete, foolproof plans. But, once a teenager has voiced a vision for their life, they might give you the space to advise them on the steps they might take to reach their goals. They're more likely to do that if they feel like you actually care about them *having* what they want—and you're not just trying to turn them into *you*. From there, you'll be working *together* to support them in building a fitting identity that taps into their most authentic self—while helping shed light on practical realities they have not considered.

We're all learning as we go and there is no perfect way to think, feel, be, or communicate. This commentary is not meant to criticize the writing or Madeline's character. The lesson here is that listening with an intent to understand and connect is more skillful than bulldozing someone with your perspective or agenda. Especially when it comes to teenagers, who are building a mental picture of who they are and what they want, even though they don't see all the pieces of the puzzle. You can foster an alliance with your teenager by dropping your agenda, asking good questions, and framing the lessons you want to teach through the lens of their answers. Their perspective, while less mature, is just as valid as your own.

Here are a few questions you're invited to consider about these topics:

- How does it feel when someone tries to convince you to do something without ever asking about your motivations, interests, or goals? Does it feel connective? Do you feel minimized or bulldozed?
- When you're trying to convince someone to see things your way, do you do so with tone and emphasis? If so, do you notice if it sets the stage for a battle of wills? Do things tend to go differently when you soften and approach with a genuine intention to connect and understand—even if you're pursuing a particular outcome?
- What's the point of being a parent? Is it to help your child learn the same lessons that you learned? To save them from the troubles you experienced? To nurture their uniqueness even if they are very different than you? If you see your job as a parent as turning your child into something in particular, you might find that it backfires. It may be more useful to explore who they are, how they are similar to, and different from, you, and modify your job description. If your job was to help them put *their* uniqueness into the world in ways that create a relatively stable and fulfilling life, what would you change about your approach?

OK, that's it for this exploration of listening and connecting instead of bulldozing someone with your perspective. I hope you found some tidbits that you can apply in your own life.