



Family Traditions

Thanksgiving is more than just the back door to Christmas

By Kelli Wheeler

When I was little, I viewed Thanksgiving as the layover between Halloween and Christmas. I disliked turkey. I hated stuffing. Thought cranberry sauce was disgusting and pretty much just ate the Jell-o salad and rolls for the big feast. I did like getting out of school for nearly a week, though.

What I did really look forward to was that the second we kids got out of school, with car already loaded, we traveled from the Bay Area to Monterey to Gramma's house for the Thanksgiving holiday break.

All our family was in Monterey, and for every major holiday, birthday and a good chunk of the summer, we went to Gramma's house, gathering the family around for big meals and big fun. The kids would run off to play with cousins (in hindsight, horribly unsupervised) and the adults would gather around the kitchen table to talk or play games. Many times,

when we kids came stumbling back in the house to see what the adults were up to, they would include us in some new game (oh, the Boggle tournaments!), with the whole family squeezed into my Gramma's kitchen, shouting and laughing.

To me, holidays were about family. That was the redeeming quality of Thanksgiving. I loved the chaos: the frenzy of women cooking in the kitchen, the men and boys (and me) gathered around the TV watching football or throwing the football around on the lawn, laughing and playing with cousins.

Our traditional gatherings were excitedly anticipated and as comforting as a favorite blanket, wrapping my huge family around me. It was a delight to the senses with all the sights and sounds, smells and feel of a warm and happy home.

The first Thanksgiving my husband Trey and I were married, I invited his family to join ours rather than figure out whose house to go to for the holiday. His family unit included a grand total of six people

who were easily incorporated into our multigenerational and extended family gathering. In fact, it was hard for me to imagine what it must've been like to have such a small and quiet gathering for the holidays. No fights breaking out between cousins? Not enough people for a game of two-hand touch? No kiddie table? Everyone could fit in one room and there wasn't a hodgepodge of folding chairs?

However, after spending a few holidays with my husband's family, I came to appreciate his kin's simple family traditions: the beautifully decorated main table with the wedding china, Grandma Honey making her cream cheese and celery sticks, Trey's dad in the kitchen at the helm of the feast rather than a pack of women. I quickly realized it is not the size of the family gathering but the love that is found there.

As this Thanksgiving approaches, it is interesting to note how our family traditions have changed and evolved. First, we outgrew Gramma's house and moved on to Aunt Sandie's as siblings and cousins grew and got married, inheriting new family members. There have been deaths and noticeable absences; there have been births and joyous additions. There have been miles separating us that have been too far or expensive a gap to bridge but never a collect phone call away. And finally, there have been spinoffs as we have divided our huge extended family into separate and more personal family gatherings.

I'll be curious to see how my children, when they are older, recollect our current Thanksgiving family tradition. I hope they'll fondly recall the grand ceremony of getting the holiday tubs out of the shed and transforming our house into a festive fall celebration. I wonder if they'll cherish the trek through the backyard gate to Nana and Pa's house and the intimate family gathering, just as I cherished the hours of travel and the boisterous clan that awaited me and my family. I suspect they'll never forget piling four generations into our SUV the day after Thanksgiving and spending a magical time at the ranches of Apple Hill.

But mainly I hope they will always value family tradition. Thanksgiving is not about how many days off from school you get, or whether or not you like turkey baked or fried. It is not just the back door to Christmas and the weekend of perpetual leftovers.

Thanksgiving and the holiday season is a reason to gather your family around you, no matter the size or the formality, and be thankful that all the people assembled together love each other and are happy to have an occasion to celebrate it. That's what the true meaning of family tradition is.

That and Jell-o salad. You cannot go wrong with Jell-O salad.

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