

Generation to Generation

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The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, Oregon
December 21, 2008**

Last week I held circle discussions after each service in the library. The subject was family holiday traditions – What are some of yours? What traditions have nourished you and your family?

In one of these groups, we had a brief discussion on the subject before people offered personal examples. One person noted seeing an American soldier in Iraq on television. With a few seconds to send a message back home, he asked his mother to send his grandma's recipe for a favorite dish.

You've probably heard the aphorism, "There are no atheists in foxholes." Many people in great crises turn to God. It's also true that people in great crises turn to their families, often their mothers, and to physical objects connected to their families, including food. It's visceral. That soldier might have spent a lot more time thinking about other things when he was home, his love life, his car, career goals, games, whatever. But when given a chance to connect home, he wants a family recipe.

Another person in the discussion noted, "Tradition was thrown out in the 1960s. People tried to change their life, their family, their country." Many people appreciated this conversation about family traditions and rituals. It seems we don't do this sort of thing much anymore. How peculiar! As Christmas, Hannukah, and the Winter Solstice are approaching, shouldn't it be a natural conversation starter to ask, "So, how does your family celebrate the holidays? What do you eat? What do you do? Are there religious components? What does it mean to you?"

I'm sure some of you have had conversations like this, but my sense from last week is that it doesn't happen very often. In liberal circles in America, tradition is often seen as stultifying. In the 1960's many people traded tradition for individualism and "freedom," although many found that freedom without rootedness and accountability came to feel more lonely than joyful and free. Tradition is undervalued in liberal American culture, including Unitarian Universalism. When we create a space to honor traditions, many people are breathing a sigh of relief and finding they have much to share. Perhaps we should start a Traditions Anonymous Group. Here are paraphrases of some of the things shared at last week's inaugural Traditions Anonymous meeting....

Hanukkah in my family meant chocolate chip cookies and songs and games.

Yes, *food* in my family holidays, too. Latkas made by my mother: “like biting into clouds.” With sour cream and apples. Grandma called them “lefties.”

We played a “stocking game” in a store, hiding from one another, finding stocking stuffers without anyone seeing what we found.

We bake cookies and sing carols, sing lots of Christmas songs.

We gave ornaments to the kids – now adults. Near the top of the tree used to be a 12-inch string of glass balls. Just one remains now, hanging from the tree.

On Christmas Eve, no matter what, we always gather at one of our adult children’s homes. We host Christmas dinner at 2 pm. We prepare the main dish and have a buffet. We listen to a Welsh Christmas story.

My wife and I have started a new tradition of hanging peace flags, in many languages, outside of our home and above the fireplace. This expresses the true meaning of the season to us.

I grew up with lots of music and singing at home and at our Presbyterian Church. Now we celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, and the Solstice. We light a menorah and tell the story of the heroic Maccabees. We hike up Mt. Pisgah at dawn on the Winter Solstice, bringing hot cocoa. Following a Mongolian tradition (at least one of the family members has lived there), we walk in circles at the top, three times, praying for ourselves, for our family and friends, and for the world. We sing and offer a loving-kindness blessing.

We used to listen to Christmas records until we wore them out last year! Now we play Christmas songs on the piano. We bake loaves of bread and deliver them to a homeless shelter on Christmas Eve. We watch A Christmas Carol.

I often spend much of the holiday season alone. I have an artificial tree with old, beautiful decorations, some from my mother. I have Christmas dinner with my daughter and her partner. I’ve listened to “A Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote. I’m looking for a new Christmas ritual.

My Norwegian family enjoys a rice pudding, *Risengryn Grod*, not easily pronounced by our minister. It’s basically milk and rice cooked forever, with a skinned almond hidden into one of the bowls of pudding. When skinned, the almond is the same color as the pudding and thus not easily spotted. Whoever gets the bowl with the almond wins the prize: a pig.

I was a single father for four boys for six years before re-marrying. I allotted the same dollar amount for each child’s presents. We had a Christmas Tree in the living room and a rule: nobody to the tree until 7 am. We opened one present at a time, saying thank-you to the giver. I made a Christmas breakfast known as “Special Treat Pancakes” – essentially Crepes Suzette.

I grew up in a huge family. What can we depend on? Difference! Being together! Gifts and gift-giving. We've scaled back now – a small, living Christmas tree, flags of religious and peace symbols, a creche, some decorations.

My parents were Jewish and Italian-Catholic. We had homemade raviolis. The food preparation, serving, and cleanup were all done by women. Sitting in the parlor, smoking cigars, swapping stories – that was the men. Now in Oregon, we go to the forest and cut down a tree. This is different. We give gifts without indulgence.

On December 26, my son comes down, and we make raviolis! This is also my birthday. I sing with the Eugene Glee Men in retirement and nursing homes. We have lots of music during our holidays.

We hug stuffed animals and give them away.

We go caroling, on December 22, hopefully with other members of our UU church...

We have a gift exchange. We've given and received many ornaments over the years, each with a story. For three generations. We have so many now we can't hang them all on our smaller tree, but still, the stories!

We straighten used wrapping paper, remove tape, flatten and re-used ribbons.

We have a book exchange.

On Christmas Eve, we each tell a story of a Christmas past.

Growing up, on the day before Christmas we did not eat until we had a pot of soup on Christmas Eve. It was hard to wait. One of the kids would say, "I'm hungry!" and the reply would be "Eat a carrot!" I don't remember calling it this, but this was a fast or semi-fast.

I appreciate reflecting on Advent, with time to appreciate the quiet and darkness. I like pacing celebrations across the season.

We celebrate several traditions. We decorate the tree on the Solstice, with pine cones, strings of Cheerios and dried oranges. The tree topper is a Blackfoot woman – I'm one-quarter Blackfoot. On Christmas Eve, we go with my husband's parents to Masonic Cemetery. We sing Christian Carols at dusk, loudly. Santa Claus comes out of the cemetery!

When I was growing up, the children in my family re-enacted a Christmas birth story. It involved dogs and lots of singing. We performed for the adults.

My family now partakes in my husband's Norwegian rice porridge meal, in which the winner is awarded a Marzipan Pig, an almond-shaped pig.

We give each other one present each on Christmas Eve.

I grew up the youngest of six, the eldest siblings much older than me. I helped prepare the house for the returning older siblings, including making a candy wreath. We started baking in early December, including molasses cookies, with a little brandy. We put on paper-bag puppet shows!

It was a joy to hear all of these stories. People truly seemed to enjoy hearing one another's stories and sharing their own – these could have been longer gatherings. I shared a beautiful tradition from Wendy's family – her mother gave her a new Christmas ornament each year. After she died, Wendy kept on giving herself a new ornament, from her mother.

While I have many fond memories of childhood Christmas, with a large family and a giant tree, I have not maintained many holiday practices in my own home as a single minister all of these years, and I feel lucky to be folded into the many holiday traditions of Wendy: ornaments with stories, enough for the live tree and the little silver and gold Christmas trees, three creches (manger scenes), many religious and seasonal decorations and practices, much soul and care and love.

Earlier I shared a remark from last week that tradition went out the window in the 1960's. Rather than honor and reform traditions, many people discarded and replaced them with individualism. One of the stories from last week illustrate a beautiful relationship with tradition. One man shared matter-of-factly how in his family the women did all of the preparation of the ravioli meal and cleaning up, while the men sat around, smoked, and talked. One could easily conclude from such an experience that tradition is sexist and evil and distance oneself from all aspects of it. But he found a way of identifying and naming the situation, setting aside the sexism while honoring the togetherness of men: his son still visits for a ravioli meal, and he sings in a men's choir at nursing homes. And he married a strong woman. What a great way of honoring his family traditions and his ancestors, building on them, rather than blindly copying or rejecting them.

What traditions do is link us to our past, giving us a grounding in this world, even if an imperfect one. They give us practices that shape our character. They root us in the seasons, nature's seasons and religious seasons. All of these links take us out of ourselves, help us know ourselves as something larger. We may be spinning in our little personal dramas, but heh, it's time to cook that rice pudding or trim the tree or bake some bread and deliver it for the homeless. This is what we've done for generations – or at least this is what we're doing, and it connects us to a larger life.

To live soulful lives, to live with deep satisfaction if not joy, we need to know ourselves as part of a larger story, and perhaps to be adding to that story, generation to generation. Sometimes we step into the stories of others, or our stories intersect and reform. The best stories are told and re-told many times, and pretty soon, we know them by heart. When we repeat actions as traditions or rituals, we can know them by heart, too. They become part of our very being. They become a doorway into a deeper, richer life, shaping us to be people worthy of the veneration of our familial, biological, or spiritual descendents.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer...

Living Spirit,
Song of our ancestors,
Holy presence of our kin,
Hope of our descendents,

We turn to you now.

We seek your spiritual presence in quiet calm, in peace, in perfection.
You come banging on our door with loud songs, bright colors, fattening food.

We seek you on the mountaintop, in a book, alone on the ocean's edge.
You come to us disguised as an in-law on the other side of the political spectrum,
as a story from a tradition we've rejected,
as a memory of pain interlaced with love.

We seek you as the truth that will set us free, right around the corner.
You come to us as the truths of our lives, complex and incomplete,
with an invitation to go deeper,
to instill in ourselves the best of the truths we have already received.

May we live the lives we have now, as lovingly as we can.
May we honor and pass on the best of what we have received.

Blessed Be and Amen.

Benediction

May we live the lives we have now, as lovingly as we can.
May we honor and pass on the best of what we have received.