

Traditions and Rituals: Life's Defining Moments

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

As soon as I said we were going to make Easter cookies, my three year old began tugging the ironing board out of its closet. "What are you doing? I asked. "Easter cookies," she said. We stared at one another a moment — and then I remembered.

Each year I make a special anise-flavored Easter cookie, the ones I learned to make as a child in Grandma's kitchen beside my mom and gathered aunts. Since we made these only once each year and there were a lot of us — we made a lot of them, which means that I, too — make a lot.

Once these cookies are baked to golden perfection, we frost them in pinks, greens, and that muddy color you get when you try to make purple using food coloring. Oh yes, and lots of chocolate. Then the frosting must harden, or they would all stick together, which brings us back to the ironing board.

As a new family with one child and little money or furniture, the small table we had couldn't hold all of those drying cookies, so the previous year I had hauled out, you guessed it — the ironing board. Thus today, my daughter was tugging out our ironing board. A new tradition had been born.

– Solution –

Traditions and Rituals

According to the dictionary traditions are customs handed down from one generation to the next, with rituals being more formal acts. John R. Gillis, of the *Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life* describes rituals as links that erase time — at once bringing together generations, past and present — as well as those yet to be born. My Easter cookies were all of these.

Sidelined connections

One of the least visible changes in modern Western culture is the disappearance of our everyday rituals. Under the sponsorship of the *Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*, six long-term projects have been examining the family fabric of Americans. What they've found is that many of our everyday connections are disappearing: the dinner table (less than one-third of families eat together more than two times per week); shared spaces at home (children have private bedrooms, adults — home offices; while kitchens often stand vacant except for the time needed to microwave ready-made foods); even personal greetings (hugs, kisses, or acknowledgements of one another upon arrival or departure) are vanishing.

Traditions and rituals — big and small, formal or accidental, even seemingly silly — matter because they connect and define us. They create belonging. When we bypass everyday rituals we risk losing our human connectedness.

Though traditions and rituals may bend, expand and even be reshaped — their presence in our lives is vital.

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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Look around

Some traditions or rituals are easy to identify, such as the way a family holds hands before each meal — but others are less obvious.

Survival

Crisis brings our need for rituals into sharper focus. Joining hands in a circle, lighting candles, and praying or singing together offer solace and connection when we lose a loved one, mourn a school's shooting victims, or try to stumble through the devastation of a tsunami. This same comfort exists in everyday acts.

Climbing into bed for a morning snuggle, reading *Curious George* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969) night after night, or making Saturday pancakes — such personal rituals serve as a sort of experiential Braille, especially when children or adults are groping through dark, painful, or anxious times. Children demonstrate this well.

A child who moves between households after a divorce seeks out the family cat, checks on the location of her marking pens, or pours herself a glass of orange juice in her special *Lion King* glass upon arrival, week after week, or even when the visits are months apart. These rituals reassure and reconnect her, representing important anchors in the shifting currents of her life.

A child adopted as a toddler may insist on sleeping with a blanket over his crib, the cocoon he experienced in his orphanage life. Honoring this sleep ritual goes beyond comfort and recognizes its deeper value, his means of bridging different worlds.

Celebrations and food

Special foods and holiday celebrations, comprise our more obvious traditions

and rituals, and are found in every culture. My friend's Passover meal signaled spring to all her friends. Our neighbor's Ramadan sunset gatherings and the mingled sounds of laughter and Middle Eastern music floating through the night became familiar entries on our shared calendars of experience.

Examples: One year we had Thanksgiving dinner at a friend's house: without biscuits, fresh cranberry sauce, marshmallows on the sweet potatoes. Our children were so upset that the next day we had to prepare a second feast — with all the *proper* foods. Until then, none of us recognized the role of those foods to our family's definition of Thanksgiving, but their absence made them visible.

Comings and goings

Some of our most defined rituals and traditions mark transition times — marriages, graduations, funerals. Daily versions of these are bedtime and leave-taking — all transitions from connection to separation. Simple rituals: a special wave, signing "I love you" or sharing bedtime stories ease these daily transitions.

Greetings and wakings mark reconnection, the transition from separation back to connection. Perhaps yours begins with a morning hug, a "hello" kiss, or the fragrance of a shared cup of warm cocoa?

Who we are

Traditions and rituals create each family's unique identity. I make Easter cookies, setting up an ironing board on which to dry them and somehow we are connected to those same cookies spread over my grandmothers' daisy-printed plastic tablecloth decades ago. We take what went before, at times changing it in small ways, to better fit today.

My friend replaces her mother's chicken broth with a vegetarian version for her brother's serving of matzo ball soup. In my neighbor's kitchen, some of the women wear head coverings and some do not — as they blend the evening's humus or shape dolmades.

The ribbons that weave us together may change color, texture, or shape — but they remain unbroken.

The whole, not its parts

As important as the timing of Passover; whether the sweet potatoes are topped with marshmallows; or which bedtime story is reread, are the stories we share when we are together. Stories hand down traditions, create our histories, and interpret our lives.

"Remember the time we couldn't eat Thanksgiving dinner until bedtime, because mom didn't know about thawing the turkey and it was frozen so hard it wouldn't cook?" As we laugh and remember, tell and retell our stories, we shape attitudes, share values, and — connect. The frozen turkey story speaks of an ability to laugh at one's mistakes and models an underlying compassion for human imperfection. A child, who at some future date, overlooks a test page and fails his exam, has that family turkey disaster nestled deep inside him, giving him the resilience to bounce back from failure and experience his own human imperfection with compassion.

Resilience

That may sound far-fetched, but the *Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life* has found that children who share in family narratives score higher on tests that measure family functions, self-esteem, and even on their ability to see themselves as having control over their lives, all of which translate into — resilience.

We cannot always make the world safe, just, or avoid even temporary goodbyes, but we can nurture an inner core of resilience, that cushioning which enables us to bounce back, up, or beyond the struggles of the day.

Can you see them, yet?

What are the invisible rituals of your daily lives? Are they special rhymes, “*Good night, sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite,*” recited at tuck-in time; the annual phone call an uncle makes to play “Happy birthday” on his trumpet; or cups of milky tea sipped around the dinner table? Are your connections frayed? Missing? Disappearing?

Connect up

Traditions and rituals strengthen families. Our family stories, both what we share and how we interpret them, transmit values, satisfy our need for belonging, bring solace, and connect us to who we were, are, and will become. They build resilience as we remember our yesterdays; embrace today; and face unknown tomorrows.

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