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Holidays, Traditions and Grandmothers

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Life is a series of cycles – and without these cycles, life has less meaning and less wonderment. One of the ways in which we enjoy the cycles of life is with traditions. Some traditions are cultural, some are religious, and some are personal. Traditions are important because they:

- Enhance anticipation and add magic and charm to life.
- Focus on what is valued in a family or group.
- Add continuity to life, reminding us of the past and helping us prepare for the future.
- Distinguish us from others, giving each of us a unique quality, which ennobles the individual in the face of the group.

The wonderful thing about traditions is that they are not significant for their content and/or even for the time in which we spend performing them; they are significant for the order and rhythm, which they give to life. By design, human beings are creatures of hope, which requires something to “look forward to.” Anticipation is the spice which adds “taste” to life. Often, the reality of an event falls short of its expected pleasure, but the anticipation enhances our joy. And, traditions enhance anticipation, and add magic and charm to life.

Traditions also focus on what is valued in a family or group. It is possible for traditions to be corrupted – to lose their significance and to have their original purpose distorted – but that does not change their value for communicating to the next generation what is important to this one. The traditions, which we embrace, enjoy and encourage, tell us as much about ourselves as almost anything else. And, the manner in which we celebrate those traditions further illuminate our values.

Almost all traditions involve some form of food or of eating together with family and friends. This is not because the food is required for survival, but the food brings people together for celebration. Food is a medium for communicating values and intimacy. Sometimes obesity is a result of a person trying to replace with the volume of food, the significance of eating together, which has been lost because the intimacy of eating together has been supplanted by a hectic life style. Food, like traditions, should be an expression of the value placed in those with whom you eat, which is why special food is often at the heart of special occasions and traditions.

Traditions also tell us about who we are. There are three ways by which you can generally determine what someone’s values are without talking to them. Go to their home and examine the music they play, the books they read and the pictures they display on their walls. Silently, these reflect the values held by a family group. The traditions which a family unit establishes will reveal those values, also. It is one thing to say that family is important to you; it is another to organize your life in such a way as to indicate value in the family. Traditions are one way in which to bring such organization to your

life.

Traditions are silent reminders of values even when those traditions are no longer celebrated, or when the original reasons for those traditions have been forgotten. The traditions of the previous generation, which are modified by the next, nevertheless connect one generation to another. In the Broadway musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, which was made into a movie, the main character, Tevya, sang *Tradition*. He said, "Traditions remind us of who we are and of what God expects of us." And added, "You may ask, where do these traditions come from? I'll tell you; I don't know! But, they're traditions!" Even when, with the passage of time, the origins of a tradition become obscure, those traditions provide a connection from the past to the future via the present. Traditions, as much as any aspect of our lives, help define who we are by reminding us from whence we came and of where we are going. If there is a curse of modern culture it is the loss of continuity with our past. It is the loss of identity because we have so easily surrendered the reminders of our roots. Those reminders are our traditions.

Traditions are one of the aspects of life which make us unique. While our traditions may resemble those of others, they are not identical. Traditions preserve the uniqueness of the group and of the individual within the group. Traditions are expandable and therefore, with their elasticity, stretch to make room for innovation and change. But, they remain traditions, rooted in our past while reaching toward our future. It is amazing how the same tradition conjures up different images in different individuals. For one, a tradition brings up country scenes and snow covered hills. For another, the same tradition creates images of city streets with bright lights. But, both traditions invest value in life, remind us of whom we are and give us hope for the future.

My family's traditions would not be valuable to you but they are to me. Every year we see the Nutcracker Ballet. I love the effort required to buy tickets in June for a December event and the scramble to have everyone ready and at the theater on time. I love the music, the movement and the moments of holding, hugging and cherishing my grandchildren, just as I did my children. Every Christmas Eve, I take my grandchildren to buy a gift for each of their parents. My son has started a Christmas Eve party at his home. Friends and family come for warmth and joy – no gifts, thank you – your presence is our present.

My wife bakes and ships her fruit cakes to family and friends. You don't like fruitcake? Sadly, you've never had my wife's. She sparingly doles it out to me a small piece at a time so that it lasts for almost the whole year. It is not enough for her to have a Christmas card printed with a greeting; she writes a personal note to each addressee. And, her notes are not the traditional holiday-brag sheet to tell you that our family and grandchildren are all from Lake Wobegon because "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average." Her notes are genuine, personal and intimate.

After the Christmas celebration with our children and grandchildren is over, my wife and I load up and head to "grandmother's house." We go to see her mother and my mother. We sing and rejoice in the words, "Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go." Did you ever notice that it's never Grandfather's house?

It's always Grandmother's house. That alone tells you some about our culture and traditions.

As I write this paragraph, my chest is heavy and tears are not far from my eyes. I remember...oh, how I remember...and, in remembering, I make real those who taught me to love Christmas, both the holiday and the Holy-day. And, sadly for you and good for me; I can go from *holiday* to *Holy-day* to *Holly-day*. Traditions help us remember those whom we have loved and lost. It is another way in which we can give meaning to their lives and it is another way in which we can keep them sharply focused in our minds.

My Christmas tradition now includes visiting my father's grave. As I stand there amidst the whispering pines, I hear his voice in my mind; I remember his aroma and I picture his face. I remember how when I was a child our family drove to Grandmother's house for Christmas. I remember that my Grandmother is the great, great Grandmother of my grandchildren. I remember that my grandchildren have eight great, great grandmothers. This causes me to realize how related we all are no matter our color, nationality, faith or station in life. Make sure that your grandchildren know your traditions and that while they will make their own, they remember yours.

My mind walks into my Grandmother's house. I take a deep breath and the smells flood my memories. I hear the laughter in the voice of those I loved. It is like a picture out of a book; it is so rich and filled with wonder. I remember the clothing store in the Galleria Mall into which I was drawn by its décor. I loved the flooring, the colors and the "feel." I was not surprised to learn that the owner designed his store and its décor after the home of his grandmother. Grandmothers influence us far beyond their life on this earth.

At this time of the year, even though I know that He was not born on December 25th, I am glad that my family remembers the physical birth (the Incarnation) of Jesus Christ. Somehow, we have come to the point where some feel that if another publicly celebrates their belief, or if someone confesses their faith is Jesus, that their freedom is limited, or that such a confession offends others. I support and defend the rights of those who do not believe that Jesus Christ is God to hold to and even to teach and publish their faith or their lack of any faith. At the same time, I unapologetically confess and profess that it is my belief that Jesus Christ is God and that He Alone is the Messiah.

Whatever your traditions, value them. Respect the traditions of others and preserve your own. Respect the faith or doubts of others while practicing and professing your own. Your life, your health, your children's lives and your community will be better for it.