



A GOOSE FOR THE HOLIDAY AUTO-PILOT BLAHS

By Carol Penn-Romine

Is it possible to make it through the holidays without watching *It's a Wonderful Life* at least once? In my household the answer is yes, unless we catch it by accident. Our can't-miss movie for this season is *The Ref*, and the laughs it inspires do more for stomach muscle tone than a thousand sit-ups, a real bonus during this time of feasting. In one particularly outrageous scene, the family is gathered at the holiday dinner table, wearing wreaths of lit candles on their heads to honor their Scandinavian heritage while arguing bitterly, as if it were just another dysfunctional family gathering. But this Christmas they have among them an escaped convict who is holding them all hostage. He may be the one with the gun, but still he's forced to sit with a wreath of burning candles on his head as World War III blazes all around him. Convict or no convict, this family is carrying on with its traditions, period.

The winter holidays are the most tradition-laden time of the year, and many people hold as fast to their rituals as a three-year-old clutching a cookie. True, traditions tie us to our family and our culture, but what if we've never really enjoyed those traditions and never found much meaning in them? What if we've moved far from home, where we've encountered new customs and traditions that merit our consideration? Here's a little secret: Civilization as we know it won't end if there's a chicken or a pizza or a tray full of pancakes on the table at Thanksgiving, Hanukkah or Christmas, or if the pie is rhubarb instead of pumpkin.

Last Thanksgiving my husband and I invited our new Australian friends, Julie and Peter, to celebrate this distinctly American holiday with us. But rather than the Norman Rockwell turkey-with-all-the-fixin's, which they'd experienced the previous year when they'd just

arrived in Los Angeles, we opted for a Southern feast, to reflect where we came from and to give them a taste of regional American cooking. So early that morning, we stashed a couple of racks of pork ribs in the smoker out back, set a jug of water with tea bags in it on the picnic table to make sun tea, cooked up some black-eyed peas and collard greens, made ambrosia, and baked cornbread and a pecan pie. With the "Down From the Mountain" disk in the CD player, the stage was set for a singularly Southern American experience. Most of the Thanksgivings throughout my life blur in my memory, but that was one I'll always remember. No turkey and no bowl games, but a lot of chat about our respective countries and what it's like to celebrate holidays far from home.

As a thank-you gift, they presented us with a book of Christmas recipes from Australia. We discovered that while a Christmas feast down under may feature turkey and fruitcake, it can also include oysters on the half shell, an array of salads and the Australian dessert standard, a light Pavlova filled with fresh berries. After all, December is the middle of summer there. Why would Australians eat a rich, heavy meal from the northern hemisphere's winter when it's hot as blazes?

What prompts ingenuity in planning holiday festivities is often a blending of cultures or religions through marriage. When our friends Ted and Erika were first married, they didn't think too much about holiday rituals, but now that they have a son, they're eager to build family traditions that embrace aspects of their Mexican and American cultures.

"We plan to have a late dinner on Christmas Eve—after going to a religious service—where we'll have turkey with stuffing, but also the traditional bacalao (dried codfish) cooked Spanish style, romeritos—a kind of herb that we only have at Christmas—with mole sauce and dry shrimp patties, and lots of desserts. After dinner we'll exchange gifts with the family. And after that, when Erik goes to sleep, Santa will sneak in and do his work!"

Lisa, Tim and their children observe what they call a Mindful Shabbat. Lisa also refers to it as "Jew-Bu," a blend of the Jewish Shabbat with Buddhist Vipassana meditation. "We sit together, light candles and eat mindfully, with careful consideration of the foods we choose, so that the connections are meaningful and healthy for us all," she explains.

While Sara and Bryan decorate their Christmas tree with Jewish symbols and lots of blue and silver ornaments in honor of Hanukkah, Peter and Irene gather their Christian and Jewish families and friends in early December for a day of baking and decorating cookies.

"It gives me great joy to bring our families together each year," says Irene. "I have close to 100 cookie cutters, including a lot of Christmas and many Hanukkah ones. Everyone is invited to bring their own traditional cookie recipe or dough to share. The house smells

wonderful, the visiting is full of love, and we enjoy eating and reconnecting."

If you've never tried stepping off the we've-always-done-it-this-way treadmill, attempting something new at holiday time can seem daunting. Here are some ideas for creating new traditions and refashioning and refreshing the old ones:

1. Pick a country and learn how people there celebrate the winter holidays. Ask each person in your household or at the party to plan some aspect of the celebration, and select or make something to share. You don't have to wear lit candles on your head to enjoy the holiday traditions of another culture. It may be something as simple as incorporating new songs into the repertoire.

2. Select a dish that's traditional to your holiday table and try preparing it in the style of another culture. Instead of a whole turkey, how about turkey portions cooked up coq-au-vin style or in a stir fry or a big pot of gumbo? (See *Chicken à la Passport* for some ideas on preparing a standard dish with an international flair.)

3. Volunteer. The holidays tend to be so crowded with shopping, decorating, cooking and running ourselves ragged that it's easy to lose sight of those who need a kind gesture the most. A quick check online, in the phone book or with a local charity or church reveals a wealth of opportunities to be of service in your community. Each holiday season we cook food and take it to a place where the homeless are fed on Thanksgiving and Christmas days. Some years we stay and help set up or serve food. It's not an all-day commitment, nor something that prevents us from participating in our own holiday observances. But it means an awful lot to those whose lives are on the skids—and to us as well. Volunteer during the holidays and everyone is a winner.

4. At the conclusion of the holiday season ask everyone, "Did you like this year's activities? Which ones would you like to include next year?" Do this each year, winnowing out things that just don't rev your engines and keeping the ones that do, and see what kind of new traditions your family can fashion for itself.

Once you awaken to the possibilities for creativity and flexibility in the holidays, it's amazing to see how these ideas can enliven the rest of the year. After Sara and Bryan pack away the Christmas tree and the Jewish ornaments, they look forward to Easter, when they'll join friends in whacking a piñata filled with jellybeans and Easter eggs. Hmm, I wonder what's next. Karaoke on Independence Day?



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