

Dr. Dan *for* Today

The Power and Legacy of Traditions

Some people consider one of their favorite plays to be “Fiddler on the Roof.” Several years ago my wife and I saw it for the first time. The theme revolves around the importance of family and what the patriarch of the family, played by Zero Mostel, called “Tradition”. Whenever there was any doubt or question about what made a family work, Mostel would break into singing his famous song T-R-A-D-I-T-I-O-N! Although his definition of tradition may vary some from mine, traditions are important as the history, memories, and “heart” of the family and of one’s faith gets passed down both orally as well through example. The word *tradition* actually means “handing over” and implies that there are those who preserve it and those that hand it over to others. The Scripture is clear that parents are to be tradition bearers to their children (Deut 4: 9; 6: 4-9). Traditions and their bearers act as living pictures as the sights, sounds, and smells trigger powerful emotions and memories of past family times. Traditions act as a bridge from which the memories are connected and the feelings cross over. What we experience when we see favorite Christmas ornaments or hear “I’ll be home for Christmas,” or when we taste our favorite holiday foods is the power of traditions. Present events connect us to the holiday memory bank of our minds while the specific sight, sound, or smell connects us with the specific memory and feeling. Let me illustrate from my own life.

As a boy, I remember Christmas to be a time of festivity in our home. My grandmother would bring over her homemade pies. She made the best pumpkin and lemon meringue pies. Now, when I can find pies that even come close to my recollection of hers, I think of her fondly. In fact, every pumpkin and lemon pie is compared to my memory of hers. During the holidays we would have several relatives come over to the house. One bachelor great-uncle would come to our house, after first stopping at the local A&P to buy the best candy, nuts, potatoes, and the biggest porterhouse steaks I had ever seen. Then he would take off his suit coat, and with the smell of cigar smoke imbedded in his clothes, would coordinate the preparation of the feast. We rarely could afford meals like that for our large family. This feast was his gift to us. Whenever I think of steak and holidays, I think of Uncle Charles and the joy he brought to our home. As a kid our family always went to church on Christmas Eve. Church going was a tradition the night before Christmas. Part of this tradition was that my father always had me sit next to him because I got so “antsy” during church. He had to grab my knee to keep me still. I was excited with “visions of sugar plums dancing in my head.” Every Christmas Eve, I recall my father’s strength displayed through his firm hand. These loved ones are no longer alive to share in the holiday experiences, but the fond memories I have of them live on in my heart through the events of the season and I have passed them down to our children and grandchildren.

Someone once said, “The richness of life lies in memories we have forgotten.” There is an important life lesson here. Traditions need to be carried on, modified, or even created within our families. They are the bridges that link the past with the present for the future. They encapsulate the “feeling” state of the family. I’m fortunate to have married a woman who values traditions. When our children were young they looked

forward to doing things certain ways during the holidays and would be quick to remind us of any slight variation. As they got older, they didn't always see the importance or seemingly care as much about them, however, as adults they look forward to the same Christmas traditions that were so important to them as kids. This speaks to the importance of persevering with traditions throughout our children's lives. Stability and perseverance are significant values in any family, regardless of the prevailing adolescent opinions. They protect and guard the "heart" of the family.

Another life lesson concerning traditions is that they can link generation to generation. They can act as a common bond connecting us to our childhood, a family to earlier years, as well as family members to one another. They are not bound by age, life situations, or circumstances. They are a universal language of the family passed down through the sights, sounds, and smells of our lives. We also need to realize that traditions need to be thought through and modified to fit our specific families. As couples get married and families develop, new traditions need to be started that reflect the "heart" of their own family that can be handed over to their children and their children's children.

I'm glad that the holidays create an opportunity for me to reflect and experience memories as they are triggered by the rich sights, sounds, and smells of the season. I'm glad that our family continues to experience our spiritual heritage and family traditions. In the classic words of Bing Crosby, "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."

Dr. Dan Trathen is a minister, psychologist, international co-author, and national speaker. His counseling office is located at 19284 Cottonwood Dr., Suite 202, Parker, Colorado 80138. For more information visit his website at: www.DrTrathen.com or to contact him call (303) 593-0575 vm 111.

© Daniel W. Trathen 2009