Traditions: Connecting to the Past and the Future

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In all civilizations past and present, families have taken pride in their traditions. The many fall and winter celebrations showcase our customs, symbols, food, and music. In many ways, the seasonal events and holidays serve as roadmaps, marking significant events in the stories of our lives and creating a sense of flow, order, and balance.

Think back to the holidays of your childhood. Whatever the occasion, the rituals and traditions link our thoughts to the people and places we know. They highlight relationships with loved ones and allow us to keep the memory of those who have passed away alive in the hearts of our children. As our children imitate our actions, beliefs, and thoughts, they help keep traditions alive for the next generation. In fact, studies show that family traditions support children’s social development and strengthen family cohesiveness. In sharing memories, the elderly in the family feel appreciated and valued.1,2

Every life has a story, and every parent is a history teacher. The stories, truth or folklore, told again and again, become an important way of learning. It is the way of building bridges between the present and the past, bringing interest and relevance to family traditions. As we celebrate now and in the future, we understand, remember, and appreciate our heritage.

The American past is a story of achievement in the face of tremendous difficulty. It is filled with scoundrels and heroes larger than life, of drama, valor, and tragedy. Every recorded event highlights the excitement and hope involved in the conquest of a wilderness and the settlement of a continent. Our history is the tale of those who crossed oceans and mountains, farmed, built tall buildings, and mastered invention and technology. With each journey came our families, our traditions, customs, beliefs, and hopes for a better way of life for our children.

Tradition and History
Traditions are integral to history. The word tradition comes from the Latin meaning “handing over, passing on.”1 Often, our family history shapes the way we view the present and dictates our solutions to problems.

History is the story of how people learned new things and shared new experiences, both good and bad. As those things were told to children, each new generation took things another step forward, always shaping individual lives and building the foundations for math, medicine, art, music, and technology. These stories tell us how our lives began and how the struggles, changes, and inventions created the society we live in today.

Traditions are also the simple things that families pass down through generations: The rituals and stories of people who work every day, go home to a family, sing in a choir, serve their country, and comfort those who are ill. It is these stories that shape the traditions and the words of our personal “history books.”

As we grow older, holiday rituals reconnect us with our past, providing awareness of continuity across the generations and giving us a sense of fulfillment, security, and predictability. Heavily influenced by our heritage, identity, and values, traditional celebrations open the doors in our minds, evoking memories, awareness, and gratitude.

As cooler weather approaches, traditional celebrations begin with Labor Day and move into Thanksgiving and the holiday season and New Year’s Day. There are also harvest festivals and Halloween parties, multiple religious observances, sporting events, political rallies, and Veterans Day parades. Each event comes with its own emotions, music, symbols, rituals, values, and cultural importance. All are communal activities bonding people together.

Nearly every traditional event includes music. Indeed, music seems to be part of our genetic heritage. Mother’s sing lullabies, children chant the musical alphabet, the pioneers sang to keep steadfast in purpose, and armies maintained their troops’ morale by marching with music playing.3

Music often creates the excitement and emotional associations that we experience during celebrations.3 It has the power to take us back to days gone by, to uplift us through the tough times, to energize and push us during our work and play, to bring us joy, and to make us cry. It has the power to touch our hearts.

Parades are one of the traditional features of festivals and celebrations. Parades are associated with religious, state, or ceremonial processions. Depending on the function, parades may be military, festival, funeral, or protest.3 Marchers are usually in costumes, stepping or dancing to the blast of horns, chanting of leaders, shrieks of children, and cheers of the crowds.

Early parades were a way to boost a monarch’s prestige and cement his political authority. Fife and drum corps were assigned to sound signals, hours and alarms to troops. Marching bands became important in directing the movement of troops on the battlefield and later ceremonial events. Today, the uniforms of many marching bands still resemble military uniforms and are commonly associated with American football and the traditional halftime show.

Starting New Traditions
Each family puts their own stamp on the way they celebrate holidays. Sometimes, that could mean starting a new tradition. Traditions start
It takes an endless amount of history to make even a little tradition.

Henry James

easily. Once you have children and you do something more than once, the children come to expect it.

Traditions are important because they provide stability, a sense of family history, and feelings of connection to our roots. They keep the generations in contact with one another. Of course, some want to establish their own traditions and perhaps break away from the traditions established by the older generations. Some want to start celebrating the holidays at home, rather than traveling to their parents’ homes. Unfortunately, in our busy world the mobility of the family can be a source of distress when we are scattered. Sometimes we need to let traditions go and make new ones, or at least adapt the old ones to the new situations.

Often, the women or the elders of the family are the keepers of tradition. People from the middle generation may have to take on the stressful role of bridging the gap between the youngest and oldest generations. Younger family members may not want to take part in a tradition and the older ones feel hurt, so the middle generation has to find ways to compromise.

Diversity and the Oral History Tradition

Diversity has long been the most relevant markers of our history. We are individuals of all origins, background, and places. Our unique patterns of traits from our ancestors shape not only our values and traditions, but also our genetic makeup, which may influence our health.

This may explain the increasing popularity of family history research. Not only is there a rising interest in understanding who we are and where we came from, we are also seeking information about the future direction of our medical care. Younger people listen to older people talk about their pasts and the lives of their families. Out of this movement has been the reemergence of the traditional oral history.

The oral tradition is the way history was passed on and, in many instances, legends began. It is in the memory of people who witnessed or lived through events from their perspective. Oral history is not just the outlines, but the colors of the times and the personalities of the people who lived the events. It can be a lecture, a confessional, a verbal sparring match, an exercise in nostalgia, or any other of the dozens of ways people talk about their experiences.

Spoken memories began with the unwritten epic poems, songs, and histories passed on by storytellers from every civilization. Traditional stories of good and evil have helped children learn life lessons. Stories told around the table at every celebration can give family members a sense of belonging and an immense emotional attachment and importance to the occasion.

Family celebrations reinforce the meaning of holidays and other events of importance in our lives. They may be celebrations and traditions of actual historical events that make us aware of the principles of truth, right, and freedom. They may be celebrations of our spiritual heritage or commemorate important family events, big and small. They celebrate success and the sharing of talents and accomplishments of family, friends and neighbors. Traditions sustain a sense of well-being and strengthen the connection to our histories, always alive, always growing, and always unfinished.

Maintaining traditions and collecting memories is empowering. We discover ourselves.

References


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