

## **YOU ARE WHAT YOU CELEBRATE: RITUAL & IDENTITY**

**By Meg Cox, author of *The Book of New Family Traditions***

I used to argue about ritual with my novelist friend, Jill, a former neighbor from my days living in New York City's East Village. Jill tried to tell me that growing up, her dysfunctional family "had no family rituals." I asked: "What was dinner like?" And she replied, "We all sat on different corners of the bed, our plates in our laps, watching TV." And I said, "Well, that was your ritual."

The point is, human beings are creatures of habit: families have rituals whether or not parents consciously plan them. The question is whether the rituals are healthy ones. And whether they're destined to leave children with happy memories—or some other kind.

As the school year resumes and we all approach the holiday-heavy time of year, it seems like a good time to discuss ritual and identity and how the one helps form the other. If you'll stick with me, I'll explain how you can take a simple "Ritual Inventory" in just 10 minutes, and see for yourself if your family rituals accurately reflect your values, and your identity.

Early ritual studies going back to the 1950s show that when asked to describe their families in situations such as therapy, most start by listing their traditions: People say, "We always have dinner together" or "We never have dinner together," or something in between. "I love holidays," they say, or "I hate holidays" or "On major holidays, my Grammy cooks day and night, making all the old-country recipes."

The best rituals are a deep-seated expression of what matters most to a given family. But often we breeze through these celebrations and rituals without thinking whether they fit us, or satisfy our needs.

Try this exercise:

Take a single sheet of blank paper or a blank computer screen, and in three or four minutes, list every ritual that comes immediately to mind that is practiced by your family. First, list the daily rituals for such routine interactions as mealtimes, naptimes, bedtimes, hellos and good-byes. Then do a list of major holiday traditions. Just a line or two, no detailed descriptions.

Next, looking at the lists, ask yourself what a total stranger would conclude about a family that celebrates these things in this manner. What would this stranger conclude really matters to this family, based solely on this list? Food? Nature? Music? Sports? Having fun? Simple togetherness? Spirituality or a specific religious tradition? Books and learning? (There is no "right" answer: this is not a Cosmo-style quiz that will determine whether your family is more like the Simpsons or the Brady Bunch.)

Ideally, this exercise will be done by both parents, either at the same time or separately, with time later to compare notes. Because the next step is the key to figuring out whether your family rituals need tweaking. Fill in the end of this sentence:

"The two or three MOST important messages and values I want to transmit effectively to my children throughout their childhood are...."

Your core values and messages might include a wish to pass on a religious or ethnic heritage. Or you might want to raise your children to be socially conscious world citizens. Or your principal message might simply be one of the family's deep and lasting love for each of its members. You may want to stress the importance of education and self-discipline.

Defining these values helps you become more conscious of your intentions, and thus more effective. Rituals and traditions are the story we act out together as a family. It's the story our kids will carry forward into the rest of their lives, deeply affecting their own values as adults and, someday, as parents. So you need to be consistent about the shared story and its message.

The next step is figuring how to build these values into your ritual life. It's possible that your traditions are full of joy and love, but still leave out some important parts of the messages and passions you most want to share. This doesn't mean you should scrap your traditions wholesale. You may just want to change your emphasis on some holidays, or add a new ritual here and there.

For example, if one of your core values is to raise compassionate, service-minded children, then you need to check whether your rituals and holiday traditions have a philanthropic component. If most of your celebrations emphasize receiving gifts, maybe it's time to add some rituals about giving and helping others. Perhaps you can start working monthly at a soup kitchen as a family, or help out at the local animal shelter. (Note for service-minded families: the October issue of Family Fun magazine contains info about a new contest. Write the magazine about a philanthropic activity you do together, and you could win \$5,000 for your favorite charity.)

One thoughtful Jewish family I interviewed was so serious about teaching the importance of tithing, giving a percentage of income to charity, that they worked it into every corner of their ritual life: they even "tithed" while playing Monopoly as a family, setting aside 10% of the \$200 they got for passing Go. There is no play charity to receive the money in the game, but the parents felt that even to bring tithing up in this playful way was worthwhile, because it helped raise the issue with their kids and generated discussions.

Another family I know was Catholic but living in a predominantly Mormon community. So when the mother created the ritual of a weekly Family Night, she made the theme one of Catholic tradition to give her kids a deeper sense of pride in their identity.

Yet another family, the Vogts, whom I've written about before, made peace and social justice the principal theme of their weekly family nights, because that was one of the core values they wished to transmit.

For some families, one of the core messages might be related to getting closer to extended kin, which might involve adding close relatives to holiday celebrations. And perhaps helping to plan an annual or bi-annual reunion.

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