

Discovering thanks this holiday season

By Rebecca P. Coniglio

It is November, the leaves are falling, the days are getting shorter, and families are making their Thanksgiving plans. For me, I can close my eyes and the aroma of my mother's house on Thanksgiving Day rushes over me. She always makes her famous mushy-mushy, what she calls stuffing and more food than our small family could ever eat, but just that is enough to spark a feeling of gratitude deep within my heart.

I am a child of divorce, a title I have worn reluctantly since I was 10. Now, as a grown woman with a family of my own, holidays and divorce still stir-up a complex set of emotions. On one hand I remember the challenges my family faced when I was a child, especially during the holidays. On the other hand as an adult, I am full of gratitude for my past, present and hopeful for the future.

After my parents' divorce, my mother tried to keep some of our family traditions alive, such as watching the Thanksgiving Day Parade in our pjs, but there was the nagging feeling of an empty chair at the table along with a helping of guilt and divided loyalties. That has subsided now, and I am better equipped to "find my lucky."

This is something I have been practicing a little each day. To me it means stopping, taking a deep breath, and thinking about all the people and things I feel so lucky to have in my life. I believe this is a valuable exercise to do everyday and not just on Thanksgiving, but since on this holiday, most people slow down long enough to reflect on what they are grateful for, it can be a wonderful day to start, with the hope of carrying it forward throughout the year.

I happened to have married a man who loves Thanksgiving, so I am grateful for that. He reminds me that the day is not about giving or receiving gifts or material things, but about family and food of course.

Here are some simple steps you can follow to help you and your family find what makes you feel lucky this Thanksgiving:

1. Define what it means to feel lucky. Help your children focus on all the positive things they have in their lives and not dwell on what they do not have.
2. Define what gratitude means and explore ways to express gratitude. For example, telling people how you feel about them, saying thank you, helping others who are less fortunate.
3. Write or draw with your children about the special people in their lives that they feel grateful for.
4. Call or write letters to special relatives that may live too far to visit this Thanksgiving.
5. Go around the room and tell each family member what he or she means to you and why. Parents model this for your children and then encourage them to give it a try.

For parents who are separated or divorced, pay close attention to your children's feelings and needs this Thanksgiving. Children can sense their parents' anxiety and it can increase their feelings of anxiety. The best advice I can give based on personal and professional experience is; make sure the adults are acting like adults and allow the children to be children. As much as possible leave them out of any holiday stress. Help your children to understand that even though things are not necessarily the way they want them to be, you are still a family, and there will be days full of joy ahead. Your children may not be at the same Thanksgiving table as you or their other parent due to a divorce, but the day has the same meaning for all of you. You as parents can let your children

know that you are grateful for them and be very assured that they feel the same way about you.

Take it from me, hold onto old family traditions and create new ones. Bridge your past and your present. That is why you will find me watching the Thanksgiving Day Parade, eating mushy-mushy, expressing my gratitude, and feeling every bit of my lucky.

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