

Your parent's or mine for the Holidays:
The first post honeymoon decision!

Whether you are married or not, divorced or planning to be, whether living together or in a single household with or without kids, you have celebration expectations. Where do you go to be with family, which part of the family? How many parents have expectations of you? Are you dealing with stepparents in addition to the traditional two parental sets? Are some parents deceased and bringing back partially digested memories of poorly digested turkey, ham or roast beef? (My apology to you vegetarians out there.) What about those children, some too young to travel, some wanting to travel from college or grad school only to *your/their* home? And what about caring for and including your elderly parents or for the medically or addictively challenged whatever their age? And how do your friends fit in, you know, the ones you would like to invite, especially knowing they have no preferred place to go? Are you wondering if there is room at the table for a Gulf coast survivor? And it may take weeks of pre-planning as yet another Calendar year is spinning to an end.

If that paragraph is more than you can deal with, what about the actual decisions! Yikes!

Well, I am sure you have come up with creative logistics. You take turns. You use other days in the weekend. You trade off. You have potluck plans, perhaps each guest bringing their special baked goods at the finale dessert get-together and whatever potluck contribution at the main meal. You can figure it out, but can you decipher how to deal with the stress without singing "I've lost that loving feeling?"

My coaching clients come in or should come in to develop more confidence when facing life's milestone events. They come at those moments of pain, perhaps **when planning a family holiday reunion, a wedding, a graduation, confirmation, anniversary, or 30th birthday**. In fact that is why I became the first Psychological Event Planner. I noticed that so many people planning such events suffer tremendous angst in the process. Why are so many happy milestones leading so many people to "lose it" when they should be experiencing the joy of letting go, moving forward and celebrating with their community of significant others. If it takes a village -- it best not be a village of idiots: jealous parents who never moved on from their own divorce or other grudge holders who make it all about **them** and leave you feeling or acting like the village idiot. I found I can help people at these crucial times to develop life-giving life strategies for dealing with the first ever reuniting of their divorced parents, for example. Perhaps they are facing a Monster In Law as played by Jane Fonda, peeved at losing her special only child to the not good enough daughter in law. In that movie she had never learned how to deal with loss and is forced to face her perfect storm: losing her son, her youthful body, and her job as a famous host of her own television show. But not everyone gets it that these moments of transition and loss are the time to seek help. The American way is to procrastinate. My plea to all thee who delay: Procrastinate Later!

Imagine everyone in your "to visit on the Holidays" network. There is one huge metaphorical rope that I would like you to wrap around yourself and then everyone else in that community. A tug on any two persons in the group will thereby create emotional movement one way or another to or from everyone else. And you are not going to please everyone every year. It does help however to think of all these folks as part of a larger system, the emotional connections that

provide your support network as you make decisions. Your goal is to create good will towards all involved. You've heard of separation anxiety? Well, the other side of that coin is "Reunion Anxiety," an experience that can be just as stressful and heart tugging.

So you must be skilled at saying with grace "Hello, Yes, and then later No or goodbye." Whatever you are saying, please do your best to make eye contact and spread the warmth. If you are a man, that may mean disciplining yourself to spend as much time in the kitchen before and after the meal as you spend with your buddies before the TV and football games. After all, our wives, who worry more about the appearance of the home, the needs of the kids and elders, and the cooking and serving, often carry a disproportionate amount of the stress. They also often take on too much of the burden of our feelings about separation and reunion. So be sure she sees you and you give her the loving attention she deserves and vice-versa.

What if a key member is not going to be there because of death or medical illness? After all "Life is what is happening while making other plans." If our goal is authentic communication, it is definitely worth mentioning and perhaps toasting whomever may be absent either due to death or infirmity. Acknowledge those folks even if you hated them, because everyone has redeeming qualities worth appreciating. And that is why you are together: to feel and express appreciation and family pride. It is all about caring attitude and fostering connections, especially promoting generation to generation memory with pride.

I wish you all could see the 1977 movie, *The Gathering*, with Ed Asner and Maureen Stapleton, a wonderful Christmas treat. It is about family suffering from a long term inter-generational cut off. Ed Asner plays the businessman who lost himself and his family four years earlier as he pursued his career. When he learns that he is dying, he wants a rapprochement with his four grown children and estranged wife. She helps him plan the Christmas gathering and in the process they gradually get to know each other again. Can forgiveness rise up and bring *your* family together over the Holidays as in that scenario?

What about the external political differences beyond family dynamics? What if your brother-in-law, an ex Navy Seal is a Bush lover and you would like to impeach our President? How do you cobble together some communication that allows you to maintain continuity of peaceful feeling? I suggest the use of a metaphorical muzzle, one that allows the food in but prevents your differing political views from coming out in highly charged manners. The idea of a family meal at a time of appreciation or of proclaiming peace in the world and new beginnings is wonderful as long as it is pleasant. So politely express your difference and accept each other's right to have a different point of view. There is no happiness in shoving your supposedly more right position down the other's throat. Why would you want to shame the folks in your inner circle for "not getting it?"

Well, there are familial forces at work here. They involve the natural tendency among rigid frightened and rigid families to avoid difference and separation. From conception, cell biology, however, consists of increasing differentiation during the development process. Psychologically we also differentiate as we grow, if we grow. That some times means being different in your thinking from those around you. The family in the adolescent stage of development faces the challenge of hearing the younger generation often think and do things differently. The flexible family invites the teens' friends into the family circle whatever the differences because they

know that the family is so enriched by differences. Many self-righteous, supposedly open-minded folks, however, would rather be right and stuck in sameness than be happy. Differences in appearance, political viewpoints, gender, race and class become a threat rather than a learning, growing experience. So it is not just about polite communication or choice of words. Successful being together involves an open, positive attitude - one that promotes dignity. So if you are embarrassed or ashamed of the attitude or actions of a relative or family friend, let it go! And just listen actively. That means listen without an agenda: listen with curiosity. Listen to learn and state what you think you are hearing until you get it right via feedback from the other person.

You are together to celebrate not only what is strong (rather than what may be "wrong") but also what may be different. I've asked before, the question "Why is it so **HARD** (my acronym for Honor, Appreciate, Respect and Dignity) to sustain such attitudes towards our partners, our children and others over the long haul?" Because we are waiting to receive it before we give it, especially after having been betrayed. However, maturity and spiritual healing dictates that we stay in non-dramatic dignity and offer love and unconditional regard and kindness and that we offer it **first** rather than only after having received it. That requires patience since, you may not get back the love you give, perhaps to your embittered ex partner and current co-parent for quite some time into the future.

Here is the harder part. To be able to give it to the other, we must first be giving H.A.R.D. to **ourselves**. So no matter how much time one may spend practicing new styles or modes of communicating, and laughing about one's flaws, the bottom line is to give oneself permission to face fear -- to move on into an uncertain future. Growing up means listening to one's **own** voice and creating one's **own** image of relating while the competing voices and images of our role models pop up and derail our best intentions. We "can't communicate" usually translates to I am having trouble communicating with my own self and "I don't want to know it." Please find a buddy to help you know it. Do it before you start dealing with this year's celebration expectations.

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Family Life: Keeping it All Together