

Rethinking the holidays: Traditions, change are on the table

October 15 2020, by Melissa Rayworth

Nina Bryant will cook a feast for Thanksgiving this year, as always.

Bryant works as an executive chef. But in her own family, she's the one everyone depends on to prepare her grandmother's recipes, which spark memories at the holidays. So along with a turkey, Bryant will make her grandmother's [sweet potato](#) souffle, and fingerling potatoes with tender asparagus.

This time, because of the pandemic, she'll do it all several days before Thanksgiving, then ship portions from her home in Florida to her family around the country.

That same week, Jeannine Thibodeau plans to go all out as well. She'll bake brownies three days in advance. Then she'll roast a turkey, along with "about 5 pounds of mashed potatoes and gravy and stuffing and green beans and [cranberry sauce](#)."

Since she can't welcome the friends she'd normally invite, she'll pack ample portions in gift bags with handwritten notes, then place the bags on her stoop for contactless pickup on Thanksgiving Day.

Once mealtime arrives, Bryant and Thibodeaux both plan to fire up digital devices and connect with loved ones over Zoom. Family and friends will eat together, apart, sharing in the communal experience of a holiday meal without being able to ask each other to pass the gravy.

It ever there were a year when people could use the comfort of a big holiday dinner, this is it. Yet in 2020, a joyful, multigenerational meal around a crowded, indoor dinner table is a potentially high-risk activity.

"My Thanksgiving is going to look very different this year," Dr. Anthony Fauci told CBS Evening News this week. The infectious-disease expert said his children won't be coming in from out of town "out of concern for me and my age."

Fauci said he understands the emotional attachment people have to Thanksgiving and holiday gatherings, but urged everyone to be careful this year. Evaluate the risks, especially with relatives who arrived on airplanes, and protect the elderly and people with underlying conditions.

What does it look like when when longstanding holiday traditions can't happen?

Ritual celebrations have been with us since the beginning, but there has always been room for improvisation, says Hanna Kim, department chair of anthropology at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y.

She points to recent New York Times wedding announcements as an example of how people can rethink traditional celebrations. The announcements "show the range of ways in which those getting married have in fact drilled down to what is most of significance for them—and with no homogeneity."

We can bring that same creativity to Thanksgiving and other holidays this year, says Catherine Sanderson, professor of psychology at Amherst College.

"Rituals make the ordinary extraordinary," says Sanderson. "A [pumpkin pie](#) on a random day in October is just a pumpkin pie. But a pumpkin pie

on the fourth Thursday of November is not just pumpkin pie: It's part of Thanksgiving. Our intentions, coupled with the season, elevate it."

And that's true even if the ritual has been moved because of unique circumstances.

Jennifer Fliss will serve dessert in her Seattle driveway under a pop-up tent this Thanksgiving. She already tested out the process by sharing a socially distanced Rosh Hashanah dinner there with another family.

"Traditions are great," Fliss says. "But it's OK if you do something different."

She's wondering if this disrupted holiday season will give rise to new traditions. In the future, she says, families might say, "Oh, we started this tradition of eating dessert outside because of that one year we ate it outside." This crisis, she says, "could be the entryway into something."

History offers plenty of examples of this, says Jodi Eichler-Levine, a professor of Religion Studies at Lehigh University.

During the era of mass migration from Europe to the United States, people who'd emigrated suddenly had no way to celebrate major holidays with those they'd left behind. So Jewish families began creating elaborate postcards to celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

"They were this gorgeous new art form," Eichler-Levine says. "People could share their sentiments even though they could not physically be there with their loved ones."

The key this year, Sanderson says, may be accepting that things need to evolve—and avoiding comparisons with celebrations from years past. If you try to replicate past holidays exactly, it's likely that this year's will

feel inferior.

But if we can embrace changes, we might really enjoy it. Liz Devitt's Christmas celebration this year is a prime example.

Devitt knew that outdoor meals in Massachusetts would be easier in September than on Christmas Day, and it seemed wise to get together with her elderly parents before COVID cases likely rise this winter.

So in mid-September, Devitt locked up her home in St. Louis and made the 20-hour trek to Boston. Soon she was filling Christmas stockings at her mother's home and admiring sentimental ornaments on a tree at her Dad's house.

Her family has a slew of favorite traditions. They incorporated the ones they could: Along with giving each other piles of scratch-off lottery tickets, "we had the stockings. We had the Christmas cards. We had the Christmas music and the candles," she says. "And we had our sappy Hallmark Christmas romance movies."

And they skipped those that were impossible, like cutting down a Christmas tree together at a farm near her father's house.

It wasn't normal, she says, celebrating Christmas on Sept. 27 with her dad and Oct. 3 with her mom. But it was kind of wonderful.

Bree Carroll, an Air Force spouse, is hoping she'll have the same sort of different-but-wonderful holiday season this year.

Carroll is an event planner. Last year, she helped Every Warrior Network stage a Thanksgiving feast for 1,000 airmen and their families at a convention center in Shreveport, Louisiana—something now unimaginable during the pandemic.

So this year, from her new home at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota, Carroll is organizing families to each share their Thanksgiving holiday with one or two of the single airmen who live on base. It's the perfect year to "give them a place to call home," she says, because they won't be able to travel to see their own relatives.

"Traditions are something that we should hold dear and hold close," Carroll says. "But also, there are opportunities to do some different things and share in other people's traditions and cultures."

A pandemic "doesn't have to be like a deal-breaker when it comes to holidays like this," she says. "You just have to get creative and just focus on the heart of the why. Why are we getting together for these holidays?"

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Citation: Rethinking the holidays: Traditions, change are on the table (2020, October 15)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-rethinking-holidays-traditions-table.html>

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