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Rituals & Ceremonies: The Way It Always Was, Wasn't

By Ann Rosen Spector, PhD.

Having been a couples' therapist for over thirty years, I have watched many pairs argue for years or even decades about what went wrong their first Christmas together.

It's very important to have the "firsts" exactly the way you dream they will be. It's a lofty goal often not achieved because most couples spend much more time talking about their wedding than they do about the marriage. And, a key reason why they don't stipulate what a first Christmas should be is because they assume that all normal people celebrate Christmas the same way. The right way. As they always have.

Everyone has rituals, customs, and ceremonies that are meaningful to them, and often little understanding that others do not know, share, or value them.

A good example is the "mixed" marriage between an Italian Catholic and a non-Italian Catholic. Christmas is key to their shared religion, but the resemblance often ends there.

For many Italians, Christmas Eve is the main event. The tree and house are fully decorated, the gifts bought, wrapped, and placed under the tree. Of course, there's the Feast of the Seven Fishes; I've asked hundreds of people "Why seven?" and never received the same answer. Some don't do seven but avow it has to be an odd number.

After the meal and the initial gift exchanges, there is midnight mass. Christmas Day is a time to sleep late, eat something, watch television, visit, more presents.

But it's not the only way to celebrate Christmas. Others use Christmas Eve as the time for last minute shopping, not only for gifts, but often for the tree as well. The meal is whatever you can quickly munch as the final decorating and wrapping are completed.

Christmas morning is the main event. Gifts are under the tree, there's an elaborate breakfast, and, often, church attendance. Then the big midday meal, guests, more eating, visiting, presents, and football.

Every set of rituals is customized. There were no Christmas trees in Bethlehem. It began in Germany in the 16th century and when brought to the USA in the 19th century, was considered odd and, well, foreign, by most Americans.

But people feel very wedded to their rituals and when the other person (always the other person) does it wrong, it spoils the day…there are tears and yelling, or quiet sulking. Doors slammed. Hurt feelings. People bewildered by what all the fuss is about…and the story becomes an integral, albeit unfortunate, thorn in the relationship.

If only they had discussed what the rituals meant to each of them and found a way to invent their own rituals for their own, new family. Because every ritual and ceremony was invented at some point and has changed over time, even though we often believe that they are sacrosanct and carved into stone like the Ten Commandments.

Kwanzaa, a modern holiday that began in 1966, is a combination of several different African harvest celebrations. It runs from December 26th and candles are supposed to be lit each of the seven nights.

I wonder how many families light the candles every night.

Hannukah also has candle lighting, but for eight nights. For many of us, we use more excuses than candles. A big part of the holiday, if we're truthful, has always been "What! It's tomorrow?"

Unlike Christmas and Kwanzaa, Hannukah happens on different dates in the Gregorian calendar each year, forcing us to run around at the last minute like crazed people, acquiring all the gifts and foods to make the celebration exactly as it was last year…except it isn't.

Since the first night often arrives mid-week, the feast is likely to be on whatever night is convenient, including after the holiday is officially over, in order to accommodate relatives who live far away, when school is out, and we all have time off.

When my children were very young, they asked why we couldn't have a Christmas tree. "Because we're Jewish," I told them. "But why do some of our friends have trees?" they asked.

"Because some of them have one parent who is Jewish but the other one is Christian," I answered.

My then five-year-old daughter looked at me, bewildered, and said, "I got two Jews?" As if that was an unnecessary redundancy.

If you add to this mix the marriages of people of different religions, races, or ethnicity, we're at an even greater loss to say what the "right" rules are.

Which, after all, means we all have to negotiate what our own rituals will be, and to modify or abandon those that cause tension for those that unite us.

And then…we can all live happily ever after. Or close enough.

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