

THE GIFT OF TRADITIONS

by Jean Glaraton

"A ritual is an external expression (words or gestures) of an internal disposition, feeling, or value."
Paula Hagen OSB

Parenting is the ultimate example of "learning on the job." Experience leads to confidence, and confidence is invariably followed by a new phase of uncharted territory. Such was the case for me this past year. Early on in my mothering, "Santa" and "Easter Bunny" began setting our breakfast table during their annual visit. What started as a way to simplify the fullness of the holiday morning quickly became something our children look forward to each Christmas and Easter Sunday. (And something I love to do.) To this day, we gather in one room and make our way downstairs together, eager to see what beauty and fun awaits us. As I was preparing the table last year—a little earlier and less privately than ever before—I felt sadness and shed more than a few tears about how things had changed. Our youngest believed more openly in the role mom and dad play in the magic of the overnight transformation, and my mother heart was feeling it. I knew of the importance of establishing traditions but hadn't given much thought to their endings.

Traditions are a critical aspect of family life, providing a firm foundation and expression of values held within. Rituals are active, intentional, and different from our usual routine. They become part of a family's tradition when they are repeated. Traditions are gifts. As children develop and their world expands, they rely on them to provide a sense of continuity and familiarity. As they grow into their adult selves, they carry with them the traditions/gifts. As parents, we also receive these gifts. They may come in a different package, but what's in them are the values that led to the ritual and tradition in the first place.

In my pondering since that tearful evening, I have come to understand that my ritual of setting the holiday table reflects my value of the family meal and of feeling welcomed and loved. Mixed with my tears that night was a flash forward to an image of my child setting their own table. My heart lifted, and I realized in that moment that traditions don't end. They transform. Some become memories. Others are expanded and shared. And they aren't just for the children. They are for adults as well. I can still slip downstairs after the house is quiet and prepare something special for morning. I will always provide good food and a beautiful table. And I hold all traditions in my heart: those from my childhood that are memories now; the traditions my husband and I began as a young family; old traditions that continue decades later; and new traditions yet to be established.

What rituals and traditions were part of your childhood? Your early and current family life?

How are they a reflection of your values?

Loving God,

Thank you for the gift of traditions. Help me discern how to express my values in a meaningful way, and to create rituals and establish traditions that will stand the test of time. When my heart is heavy with the uncomfortable feeling of change, may I feel your loving embrace. As time passes, rituals change, and traditions become memories, imprint them on my heart. In Jesus's name, I pray. Amen.

