

“THE BEST WORST THANKSGIVING EVER”

Psalm 103; Colossians 3:12-15

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The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. I guess I’ve just assumed that everyone else loves it as much as I do. So I was surprised a few weeks ago when a friend confessed to me that her Thanksgiving memories are not generally happy ones, or even substantive ones in terms of being “good learning experiences.” This story is for her and the probably many others who share her point of view.

When I was in college, I was always a Thanksgiving orphan. Going to school 3,000 miles away from home meant that my holiday was spent with whomever invited me wherever, and I rarely knew more than one or maybe two people seated around the Thanksgiving table. So I was pretty excited my senior year when my favorite cousin, an anthropologist named Marion, landed a job as a guest lecturer at Cornell University for the year. He and his wife had recently separated, and he really wanted me to come to Ithaca and help him prepare Thanksgiving dinner for him and several colleagues, “Because, you know, Lizzie, I know nothing about cooking.” I should have begun to worry at that statement, but I didn’t because it simply didn’t occur to me that a 35-year-old man could know really nothing about cooking. But I get ahead of myself. What was alluring to me about Thanksgiving in Ithaca other than being with close family was that my on-again, off-again boyfriend just happened to be a graduate student at Cornell, and in his vague way, he alluded to the possibility that he might potentially, maybe, if he didn’t get a better offer, spend the holiday with us. What could be a more promising beginning!

Now this was in the days before e-mail, so in the weeks preceding the big day, through phone calls and mostly letters, a menu—and a rather elaborate one at that—was determined; Marion was given a shopping list; and I agreed to drive from New Haven to Ithaca on Wednesday evening so I’d be ready to start cooking first thing Thursday morning. For those of you unfamiliar with East Coast geography, under the best of circumstances, the drive from New Haven to Ithaca takes about 5 hours. That November evening, with everyone and their three best friends on the road, and the weather a delightful mixture of rain, freezing rain, sleet, hail, and snow, it took closer to 10. I left New Haven at 3:00 in the afternoon, and pulled into Marion’s driveway just before 1:00 in the morning. Which meant that when my alarm went off at 6:30 the next morning to begin pie baking, I was not at my best. I went downstairs to find Marion reading the paper—at least he was up—and began to set out the ingredients for making two pumpkin pies. Marion kept reading the paper. I banged things around maybe a little louder than was necessary, hoping to elicit an offer of help or at least interest in what I was doing. Marion kept reading the paper. The pies went in the oven and I started working on the turkey stuffing. Paper read, Marion decided to grade some essays while waiting for the football games to begin. I was getting decidedly irritated, but charitably decided that maybe Marion just needed direction. I suggested that he stuff the turkey while I began to put together this elaborate layered vegetable dish, some Southern thing that was a family favorite of his. He looked at me and laughed, “Lizzie,” he pronounced, his most charming smile in place, “I don’t cook. And besides,” he said, walking delightedly to the television, “the football game’s about to start.” Now, I was of mixed mind here. I love to cook. I didn’t really need his help. But the principle of the thing: me working, him watching football—it didn’t sit well. And, of course, my mood was not improved by the fact that on-again, off-again boyfriend had neither called nor made an appearance. And so the balance of the morning

and early afternoon went: Marion, rapt in football fever. Me, working through pies, turkey, layered vegetable dish, mashed potatoes, and candied yams.

Around 2:00 p.m., the first of the guests made their appearance. In all, we were to be eight that day—two couples, two other single people, Marion, and me—all of them academics, except for me, the lowly undergraduate and scullery maid. And it might even have been a sort-of-fun event except that one of the group had recently returned from the Caribbean, and brought for his Thanksgiving offering two bottles of 151 proof rum and the recipe for a historically accurate 18th century rum punch. While I was finishing up the food and setting the table, said rum punch was concocted, and much of it, one might even say too much of it, was had by all—except for me whose mind was set on food service.

At about 5:00 p.m., we sat down for dinner. I was, by that point, a culinary wreck; food lover though I was, this was my first single-handed Thanksgiving dinner, and I had left completely frazzled in the dust an hour before. People seemed to enjoy the meal, but I was someplace between mortified and furious when we got to the dessert course, and I suddenly realized that the all important, secret-family-recipe layered vegetable dish had never come out of the oven. Not one of my inebriated fellow diners had even noticed. By this time, it was burnt to a fine crisp. Oh, well. Pie was paired with yet another football game and yet more rum punch. The football crowd found themselves getting more entertaining by the minute. I gritted my teeth and began washing dishes, eventually aided by the other two women in the group. It seemed that Ph.D.'s were less important than gender when it came to washing up. At about 9:00 p.m., the party began to wind down. Shortly after 10:00 p.m., I was delighted to trudge upstairs and find my bed. The boyfriend, of course, had never called or shown up. I lay down and thanked God the day was over, the worst Thanksgiving I had ever had.

I slept in Friday morning and woke to one of those beautiful sunny sparking winter days in Northern New York. About 6 inches of snow had fallen overnight. Marion, effusively thankful for all I had done the day before, took me out for a late breakfast at our favorite diner, a delightful 20-minute walk through pristine snow each way. Over breakfast and through the rest of the day, Marion and I remembered funny family stories, read, ate left-overs, and just generally hung out together. He really was and is a delightful and entertaining person. I remembered all the reasons why he is my favorite cousin—even if he doesn't cook. Later in the day, we called my parents, and had a lovely conversation with them. And those of you who have been college students or parents of college students know that it's not always a sure thing, a good family phone call, especially in those days when long distance was an infrequent luxury. It was an all together excellent day—relaxed, full of laughter. I was in such love and charity with Marion that I even cheerfully watched yet another football game with him. And finally the boyfriend called. He had gone down to Albany to spend Thanksgiving with his family, but would see me the next day. As I headed for bed that night, it was with a light heart and a thankful sense of the fullness and promise of my life.

And it came to me that Thanksgiving is not a feeling that can be conjured on demand on a particular day just because it's expected. (Although, I do think that we, all of us, like my friends in 12-step programs, would live fuller spiritual lives if we disciplined ourselves every day to try to number the gifts for which we are grateful.) But some days that's difficult to do. And sometimes those difficult days coincide with the official time we have set aside for Thanksgiving in our lives. And that's ok. The ways of the heart are the ways of the heart. And as long as we remember then not to take for granted sun shining on a bright crust of new-fallen snow, or the comfort of old stories and family and friends whom we love, as long as

we pay attention on the days our hearts are truly full and we know without a doubt the grace that marks our daily living, if that happens on days other than the day marked Thanksgiving with a capital T, then that's all right; we will have lived our commitment in faith to come before our God in joy and gratitude and Thanksgiving. Amen.