

Opinion

Ordinary Days By Lauren Denton

Make new traditions but keep the old

When I was growing up, many of our Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays took place at my grandparents' house on the outskirts of Mobile. While some details varied, many of our traditions were the same each year: My grandmother made dressing, my grandfather or uncle carved the turkey, my aunt contributed a relish tray, and my mom was responsible for a variety of side dishes and desserts.



Denton

I remember spending a lot of time sitting in front of the fireplace, warming my back and cracking pecans with my grandfather's old nutcracker. After the meal, I'd usually find my way into a comfy chair with a book and fall asleep. Later in the day, there'd be some kind of activity, whether taking a walk around my grandparents' few-acre yard or a game of horseshoes or croquet. It wasn't necessarily for any health benefits, but more just to settle the stomachs in preparation for an extra slice of pie. Football was usually on the television, glasses of sweet tea sweated on the back porch (because it was often in the 70s or higher in Mobile, even during the holidays), and we listened to family stories we'd all heard dozens of times though they never got old.

My grandmother, Mema, was the queen of the holiday gatherings for a long time. She always kept a close eye on everything going on in the kitchen, making sure it all turned out according to her liking. She typically made a pie or two, pans of dressing (not stuffing), and usually some kind of beans or peas, along with the standard "vegetable" of mac and cheese. In my minds' eye, I see Mema standing at the stove in her brown-paneled kitchen, a wooden spoon in her hand and a dishcloth over one shoulder, her dining table heavy-laden with dishes of food.

As my grandmother grew older, my mom took over the majority of the planning and cooking. Most of our Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts moved to my parents' house, and now my mom was the one standing at the stove, tasting the dishes and setting the schedule and menu for the day. She branched out though, daring to veer from the standard turkey and sides that made up most of our holiday meals. I remember one Christmas she made a decadent oyster stew, and somewhere along the way, she added potato latkes to our menu as a delicious

nod to my family's Jewish heritage.

No matter whose house we gathered in, there was always a warm kitchen full of chatter and laughter and food.

These days, my family's holidays look different than they used to. Three of my four grandparents are gone, and I no longer live in Mobile, so while I get to see my remaining grandfather and aunts here and there, it's not as much as I'd like and definitely not as much

as I used to. But we're still laughing, still eating and still celebrating, and for the past few years, the kitchen where we've gathered has been mine.

Now that I have my own children, I look at holidays differently than I used to. What memories are they tucking away in their minds that they'll pull out later and tell their own children? What traditions are we building that they'll continue with their families years from now? Are there customs from my grandparents, or maybe even further back, that we need to rekindle? What memories and traditions can we keep alive, while we're still creating our own rhythms and stories for today?

Looking up at my grandmother and my mom, they always seemed to know just what to do to make everyone feel comfortable and welcome and taken care of at their homes. Now that many of our holiday events are taking place at our house in Birmingham, I often fight feeling inadequate in the Queen of Holiday Gathering department. I've never cooked my own turkey, I have no idea how to make a deviled egg (that's my brother's department), and (shhhh) I've poured Milo's sweet tea instead of making freshly brewed.

But I think the important thing is my kids are getting to have the same experience as I did: a kitchen full of laughter and food, generations of family celebrating together, enjoying each other and telling stories of those paved the way before us.

When I'm not writing about my family and our various shenanigans, I write novels and go to the grocery store. My novels are in stores and online. You can reach me by email at lauren@laurendenton.com, visit my website laurendenton.com, or find me on Instagram @LaurenKDentonBooks, Twitter @LaurenKDenton, or on Facebook ~LaurenKDentonAuthor.



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