



The Fun & Dysfunctional Thanksgiving

By Cynthia Howe

THE CRISP SMELLS OF AUTUMN are in the air and for many across our nation the memories of happy Thanksgivings past circle their hearts and minds. However, for others it's a tangle of mixed emotions. It is not hard to feel your spirit crushing under the expectations of what the holidays may bring. Some picture Betty Crocker dressed up as a pilgrim in front of a Martha Stewart table, and their mind goes numb and their knuckles get white.

The problem for many is their family tree is burdened with the weight of difficult people. Overachieving siblings who want to tell you how to get your life together, negative aunts who invite your ex-husband over (because she always just loved HIM), emotionally needy cousins who want more of you than exists, or the uncle who asks the same questions at every gathering. Here are some sound bites of such family blunders and obnoxious statements that may be familiar to you, too.

"Yes mother, I'm wearing THIS!"

"Fifth child? How many are they going to have? Don't they know what causes that?"

"So... she's not coming, but he has a new one. Well what happened to Linda? You know the one before the other girl? Forty-three years old and never been married... can you imagine that?"

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"Ginny, what are you going to do about Larrinda at dinner time? You remember, Larry and Linda's daughter. She's one of those vegans now... you know, only eats rabbit food!"

"Is it hot in here? Why is it so hot in here! I have to open this window... now I'm cold! Why is it so cold in here? Somebody shut that window!"

"Why does she leave the collection

of crystal angels on the coffee table and then yell at my babies when they touch them! Can't she move them for one day!"

"Is she going to breastfeed at the table again? I hope not... somebody tell her not to. No, I'm not going to tell her, you tell her! He's two years old, it's just not right!"

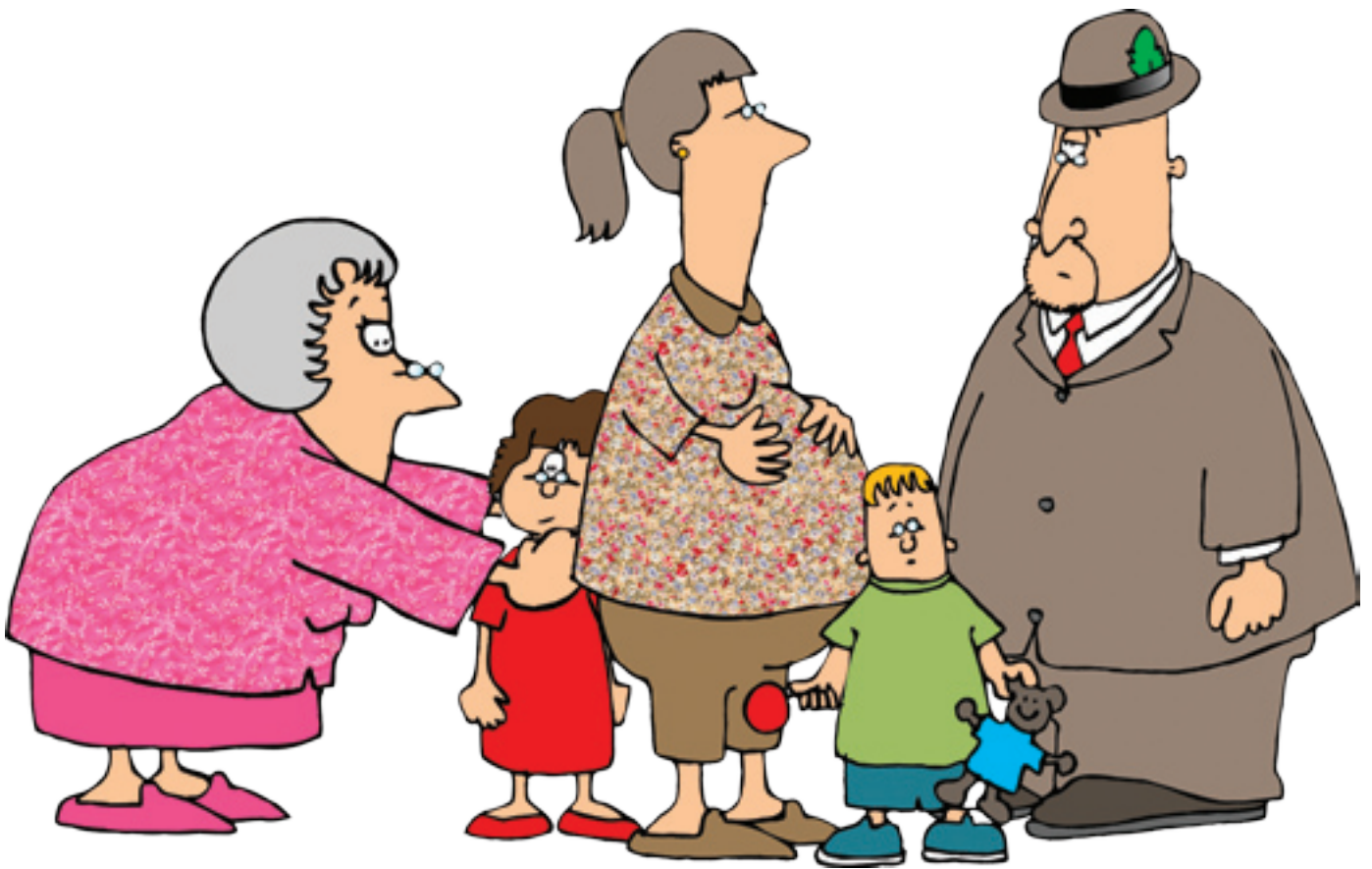
"Grandpa, you ask me every time you see me and the answers are the same, I'm majoring in art, no – I'm not seeing anyone, and yes – I plan on keeping my hair like this!"

"If I ever have children I will never let her dress like that, let alone in public!"

"Why are they homeschooling? How weird is that! Those poor children are going to be anti-social deviants who don't know anything!"

Some family members are well meaning, and others are just mean!

While some folks cringe at Thanksgiving, there are ways to ensure more cheer. First you have to learn how to deal with difficult people, and secondly you have to do what you can to make Thanksgiving more fun, no matter how dysfunctional it is!



DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

When dealing with difficult people it's important to remember three things. First of all, difficult people rarely change and no matter how gifted you are with them, trying to change another family member is like trying to change Uncle Jim's stuffing recipe! My friend "Dina" (I've changed the name to protect the friendship) admits that she would like to change numerous things about her mother. For example, why does her mother re-arrange her furniture every time she comes to Dina's house? She puts her list aside however and focuses on family holidays. Before every family gathering, she calmly and sweetly tells the Matriarch, "Mother, could you please try extra hard to be nice today?" Now this may seem simple, and it is simple, but for that day, her mother does try. They usually get just past dessert....

The second thing you have to remember is all the things you learned in kindergarten. Now for some of us, kindergarten is a lifetime ago and many may have forgotten some of the golden rules kindergarten taught us. This would make a nice banner for your front door, decorated in autumn colors of course.

1. Use your words – just make sure they're nice words... not like Uncle Bob's words.
2. Nap time is important – it's not just for small children, so leave grandpa alone.
3. Let others go first – even when there is only one piece of pecan pie left, and leave the comment about your sisters' thighs alone.
4. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – you wouldn't want to walk around with your zipper down and have all the children laughing behind your back, so don't leave your ex-husband looking like that.
5. Play fair – don't compare your over-achieving son to your cousin's daughter who successfully flunked every class in 9th grade (how do you flunk P.E.?).
6. No fighting, biting, hitting or ridiculing – even when playing football with your brother and his five biggest friends home from college.
7. Say "please" – even when you ask your hair-dyed-black-leather-boot-wearing-earring-in-the-eyebrow nephew to pass the sweet potatoes.

8. Say you're sorry – when you step on toes, literally and figuratively.
9. Hold hands – especially during prayer, and no hand-mutilating-squeezes going on, Grandma's watching!

Most importantly, remember to always maintain control of yourself. Do not give in to the anger, frustration or hostility of others. When someone is extremely inappropriate, use the Queen Victoria look. You've never heard of this? Many elementary and high school teachers use it every day and it works quite well with family members as well. For example, my sister-in-law once commented on my sons' highchair behavior at a family gathering. He was having a great time with his mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and corn. He was 18-months-old and brilliantly creative. My childless relative wrinkled up her German nose, while looking down it, and said "Zoold he be allowed to be zoo mezzzy?" Here comes the look: I slowly lifted my eyes to hers, commenced staring into them with a gentle, albeit firm smile on my face, just like the queen herself, and said, "Yes." I continued to look at her, as the Queen would have, until satisfied

that she would not reply. She was well behaved after that.

PUT THE FUN BACK IN DYSFUNCTIONAL

Now that we've agreed how to deal with the dysfunctional people that grace our family tree, we are ready to start looking forward to Thanksgiving and the fun we can have. Building traditions can be a lifesaver and serve as a foundation for establishing positive memories for years to come.

I remember what grandma use to say, "Idle hands are the devil's tool chest." We don't want the devil letting his hammer loose, so it is recommended that tasks be assigned to most family members. Beware, some may grumble, but usually it's accepted positively as something to do while avoiding other, possibly uncomfortable, situations. Some great tasks include: organizing the family football game, gathering a list of things that family members are thankful for to share at the meal, a Thanksgiving poem or story to be read or even a small talent show before dinner.

My mother-in-law's family had a wonderful tradition of having just such a talent show before family gatherings. The kids played their piano recital pieces, danced their ballet parts, played their guitars and some of the older folks read poetry and told family stories. The kids loved it and the adults appreciated the safety the tradition provided. There was always something to talk about after such delightful performances.

Another example of keeping the insane sane, assign a few children and teenagers, (especially the one in the corner texting his friend, making furtive glances around the room, laughing and then texting some more), to decorate the children's table. Have lots of materials on hand and let them have fun – they'll love it! Let the Indians have pink tutus, it's okay. Grandma might not like the leather clad pilgrim in the middle holding a Sonic burger in his cornucopia, but maybe she won't notice.

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