

NORTHERN HOLIDAYS—Ideas for a Season to Remember

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## Storm of the Century

*Winona's Web*

Author Shares Her

**SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

Discover the Power of

**SIMPLE TRADITIONS**

**PASTY**—Soul Food  
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TIME FOR

# *Tradition*

Especially at the holidays, "tradition" can be an intimidating word—something for those other people, the ones with bigger families, more creativity, more time. Even if you have no traditions of your own (or just don't realize that you do), it's not too late to get started. It's easier—and more important—than you may think. BY KIM SCHNEIDER



**S**haron Wyn didn't panic when her oldest son called from hours away with a desperate plea. He was in his first semester of college, and the season's first flakes of snow were falling. Even before he uttered his request, Wyn had guessed what he needed: homemade jam.

At the Wyns' Traverse City home, the first snowfall is one of many reliable excuses for a celebration: in this case, the ceremonial opening of the first jar of homemade preserves from the summer's fruit. The jam was sure to be tasty; but sweeter still (even to a college freshman) was the way the jam brought back memories of berry picking adventures and lively conversations around a simmering pot.

"Even the simplest of traditions take on special meaning if linked to feelings of joy," Wyn says. She has spread the importance of tradition in her classes at churches and community centers over the years.

But even simple traditions don't happen by accident. "We like to think the best things are spontaneous," Wyn says. "But for the majority of times, special moments have to be planned for in advance. Then they become precious memories."

The first-snow jam party is just one of a litany of Wyn family traditions, some serious, others quirky, and all designed to celebrate something broader—friends and family, changing seasons, faith, or the beauty and bounty of Northern Michigan. Their most meaningful traditions, though, have often revolved around the winter holidays. That's when thoughts naturally turn to those rituals that define who we are, where we came from, what we value.

So before you give up on your great-grandma's complicated stuffing recipe, you may want to sit back and re-think your own traditions—the ones you already celebrate and those you feel the absence of. They may be more important than you think.

**By definition,** tradition is the handing down of customs or beliefs from one generation to the next. But all traditions have to start somewhere, and for Elizabeth Berg, the author of *Family Traditions: Celebrations for Holidays and Everyday*,



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traditions can be defined simply as something you do once and it feels right, "so you do it again and again and again."

Once upon a time, continuity defined people's lives. You had the same job, from graduation to retirement. The roles people played in their families and in society at large were clear. But these days it seems we often must reinvent ourselves in order to successfully navigate the changes in our family dynamics and in the workplace. And yet, we still crave some predictability in our lives, something we can come back to like a favorite page in a book to define who we are and structure our life stories, says Brian Hoey, a Northern Michigan-based anthropologist with the University of Michigan's new Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life.

"We used to know the beginning and we could visualize the end [of life]," Hoey says. "No longer. To the extent we can find regularity in everyday life through traditions, we have somewhere to ground ourselves."

One of the biggest mistakes we make is expecting that all we have to do is "show up" at a family holiday gathering, though, and it will be filled with deep conversation and closeness. Sometimes, "we take tons of pictures and videos and we go home to realize we mostly sat around and watched TV," Hoey says. Maybe that's OK—even our mundane interactions can define who we are, he says. But it takes only a little planning to elevate our interactions to memorable traditions.

In an ongoing research project on what attracted newcomers to the Grand Traverse Region, Hoey found that many were drawn by joy-filled memories of the simplicity of childhood vacation traditions—that was the only time, many said, they would step out of their daily routine and take time for simple pleasures like family board games and evening bonfires.



## And the Ski Goes On

Every year when Steve DeTar was growing up, his family would drive North on the first day of Christmas vacation and take up residence in an old farmhouse on longtime family property near Torch Lake.

Then, the family—mom, dad and five young boys—would head to local ski slopes. When his mother kept losing the boys in the large vacation-week crowds, she hit on the magic formula: ski on the empty slopes of Christmas Day (when others were home opening gifts and eating big meals). After Santa brought a few ski items to build enthusiasm, the family was off to the ski hill. That evening, home again, they'd eat a traditional pot pie and play games around a fire.

Now this year, Steve will treasure a Christmastime déjà vu.

Married with five boys of his own, Steve will take his family day skiing at Bellaire's Shanty Creek Resort. After finishing the day by warming up in the resort's hot tub, the family will return to a Torch Lake Cottage—the little ones now mellow enough to enjoy a few games of Crazy 8's with their cousins (the same game, of course, that Dad used to play).

"It's neat to carry on something from generation to generation, to have something to look forward to," says Steve, whose family owns Brownwood Farms. "I'll get this flashback when we're sitting around the table eating pot pie. I'll think back to when I was 12 years old or 14 doing the same thing. Here's my 12 year old doing it. Maybe some day his 12 year old will be doing it."



## Compassion through cooperation



But while a connection to a treasured place can add depth to a tradition, you don't need to be on vacation to start one. You just need consistency.

Think of the way a child enjoys a favorite storybook—that is, over and over and over—and then apply that same formula to your holiday traditions, suggests childhood expert Fred Rogers of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood."

"The pleasure," he writes, is in the "familiar way the story begins, the anticipation of the familiar turns it takes, the familiar moments of suspense and the familiar climax and ending."

Likewise, the Wyns always created a predictable story out of their Christmas day. They started every Christmas Day by opening stockings on the parents' bed. They shared a breakfast casserole of scrambled eggs and ham, with fruit on the side. Then the family opened presents from youngest to oldest, identifying them with humorous tags sure to launch fun conversation. Dinner was prime rib.

The fact that her children had routines they could rely on, Sharon Wyn believes, is what helped them emerge as confident, successful adults with strong ties to their family and friends. Wyn even receives letters from people touched briefly by her traditions. A son's ex-girlfriend wrote, 11 years after the relationship, to say that the Wyns' after-dinner tradition of listening to music and reading together was so memorable that she began the tradition in her own home.

Sometimes, the power of a tradition lies in its portability. "My grandfather loved pickled herring," Hoey says. "My mother adopted the tradition and ate pickled herring for every New Year. Now every January 1, I buy a jar knowing my mother's doing it. It can be a way to create a powerful psychic connection with family in a way a phone call wouldn't."

So what's the first step in weaving your own tapestry of traditions? Look at the activities that bring you joy, and repeat them in a set fashion. Or add a twist to a simple activity—lights along the sledding hill, a craft project at the end of an autumn leaf hunt, or just a signature meal. Need a little inspiration? Borrow from the following list. Friends suggested some ideas. Experts suggested others. Just be sure to add your own twist.

**Give—in secret:** Some years, the Wyn family would secretly “adopt” a single mother, an older person, maybe even a young couple. They would send cards, offer babysitting help, keep them in prayer, help out with chores. Long-term relationships often developed, leaving them with a large extended family. Enter with caution, though, being realistic about your time commitment.

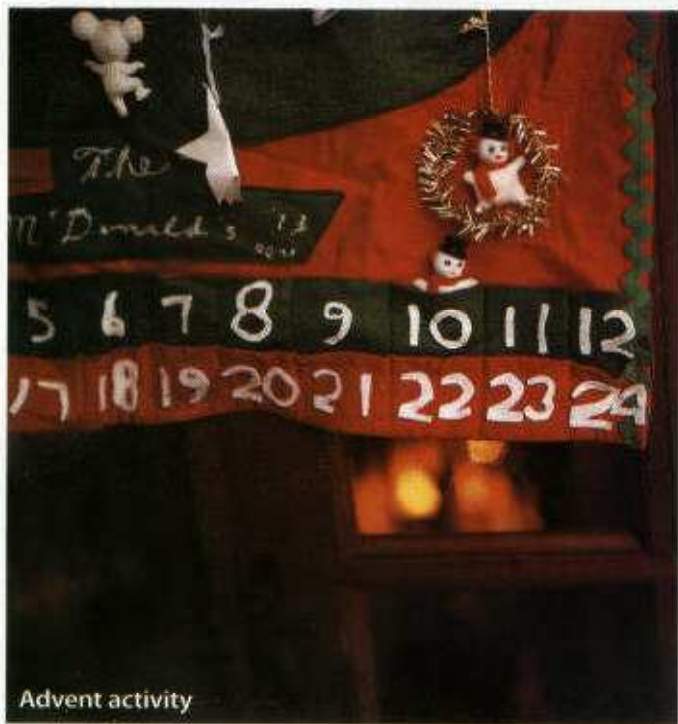
**Monthly pie fix:** If it's June, it's rhubarb pie. July, it's cherry—the Wyn family's pie-of-the-month tradition.

**Dine in unexpected places:** “Tradition” and “unpredictable” might seem, in some ways, opposite. But why not adopt a tradition of spontaneity? Eat a meal on the trunk of the car at the airport while watching the planes land. Host a midnight fish fry along the shore of a lake.

**The gift of attention:** Here's proof that donuts can be healthy. Wyn's husband, Raymond, took one of their four boys out for breakfast before school every Friday, rotating throughout the month. The menu was always donuts and chocolate milk. The meal itself may not matter; the fact the kids can count on it does.

**Tinker, don't trash:** Though she had stopped saying her childhood “grace” during a time of rebellion, one friend found she missed the chance to express gratitude at meal time. She asked her daughter, then age 4, for help, and the pre-schooler's immediate offering—“we are thankful for food, family, friends, our house and everything,” followed by each family member sharing what they were thankful for that day—remains a tradition around the table some 23 years later.

**Compassion through cooperation:** One family we know



Advent activity

of gathers literature on a handful of charities; the children get together, study the needs and decide how to parcel out a portion of their Hanukkah money. The gift can be placed in an envelope in a prominent place as a visible reminder of their generosity.

**Sing for the trees:** In England, it was apparently a tradition for a procession of carolers to visit principal orchards, singing to the trees and sprinkling cider or liquor on the roots of select trees to ensure a great crop for the coming year. What better place to resurrect such orchard caroling than here in Northern Michigan? And trees don't care if you can't carry a tune.

**Advent activity:** Wyn says the greatest gift she ever gave her children (and the most popular tip offered in her classes) combined a way to honor each child's individuality and to teach them faith. She made an Advent calendar with simple, felt ornaments that each honored something special about a family member. December 1 holds an owl for son Todd, who was nicknamed “wise little owl” as a child, along with a Bible verse about wisdom. At breakfast each morning during Advent, the chosen child would tell the story behind the ornament, learn the verse, and put the ornament on the tree. ■

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## Tradition Primers

We appreciated these resources for their interesting takes on traditions, from the ways to turn a simple walk into a magical outing, to the little-known meanings of some popular holiday rituals.

- *The Joy of Family Rituals: Recipes for Everyday Living* by Barbara Bizou (St. Martin's Press) helps you see the significance of daily rituals and to view them as a resource for the imagination.
- *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday*, by Karal Ann Marling (Harvard University Press) tells us how “things” came to mean so much in America's central holiday and in doing so gives context and history to the traditions we take so much for granted: gift wrapping, Christmas cards, charity, department store parades, trees with lights and more.
- *The Festive Table: Recipes and Stories for Creating Your Own Holiday Traditions*, by Ronni Lundy (North Point Press). Beyond recipes, Lundy shares traditions from families around the world.
- *The Giving Box: Create a Tradition of Giving with Your Children*, by Fred Rogers (Running Press) gives practical suggestions for teaching children compassion; stories from other cultures will broaden their world.
- *10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting*, by Mimi Doe (Harperperennial Library) helps you see every month as ripe for celebration. If you've never built an elaborate gingerbread house and then taken it to the woods so the fairies could dance inside, this book has some new ideas for you.

### On the Web:

- <http://www.thefreemail.net/xmasgames.html>: From candy cane horse-shoes to pop the penguin, these games are certain to add spice to any holiday gathering.
- <http://www.babycenter.com/ritualsandcelebrations>. What do you do—besides fight—when your traditions differ? This site helps keep the peace.