

The seasons of family life

The leaves are late turning this year. Flush upon the Thanksgiving holiday they still cling to the branches in yellow-bronze splendor. The 20-pound turkey is defrosting in the refrigerator. We anticipate this grateful season when three other families, as they have for almost two decades now, will arrive on our doorstep with pecan pies, candied yams and fruit salad to contribute to the yearly feast. Each season has its characteristic scents and tastes, mood and rituals. So it is with family life. There are seasons, each with its own textures, its own joys and travails, its own challenges and graces.

How aware I was of seasons at a recent potluck hosted by a faculty member of my husband's academic department. Several of those attending were, like us, free to arrive unhindered by the constraints of babysitters or young children in tow. We sat complacently around the cheese tray and exchanged pleasantries about work. Meanwhile, one young woman faculty member was in and out of the dining room attending to her 4-year-old son who was playing in an adjacent bedroom, catching snatches of adult conversation as she swept by. Another couple was on and off their cell phone with a 16-year-old daughter who had arrived home early from a high school football game and was nervous being in the house alone for the few minutes before her parents would reappear.

I remember those days so clearly. I do not miss the frantic juggling that comes with being a working mother of youngsters nor do I miss the high drama of teenaged angst. But I do miss the warmth and tenderness that seems to go with caring for little children and I miss being intensely involved in the excitement of high school, sharing the delight of our children's friends streaming in and out of the house, bursting with anticipation of the lives that stretch out so full of promise before them.

This particular season this year has its own textures for my husband and me, gathered as we are around the cheese tray: the low-frequency sadness that comes with the awareness that this will be our first holiday season without my mother, the poignant passing-on of traditions that will occur at Christmas when, for the first time, our eldest daughter and her new husband will be the family hosts rather than us. This year only two of our three adult children will be able to return to the home Thanksgiving table; the same patchwork attendance will be true for the other families as well. College, medical residency, volunteer service will claim some of the younger generation. But our son will bring his new girlfriend as will another family's son. And so the cycle of seasons plays itself out.

In the midst of this season of transition, both natural and familial, I find solace and challenge in the lesson of Ecclesiastes "For everything there is a season." The radical yet gentle spiritual arts of welcoming and letting go so central to family spirituality play themselves out again. We are allowed into the mystery of the constant subtle adaptations of family life, learning to love again and anew in each changing circumstance. "Love one another." And here it is, newly configured in this autumn season, the same yet ever transformed and transforming call.



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