Parenting As a Spiritual Journey

Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

Ch.9
Thankfulness

For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

JEWISH LIGHTS PUBLISHING • WOODSTOCK, VERMONT

Chapter 9

DINNERTIME

Thankfulness

"We have been given so much—we pray for a grateful heart."

Dinnertime. From the western window, a beautiful red haze illuminates the dining room. The children, clean and scrubbed, dressed in their finest, are lined up in front of their seats, ready to sing grace. A table is set, a royal banquet, and the food is all ready, simmering warm on the stove. The answering machine is on, ready to intercept phone calls. TVs and CDs are silenced. Candles are lit, wine poured. There is peace in the home, peace in the hearts, and the family is ready for the moment when once again they will acknowledge their gratitude at the end of the day. Everyone is eager to break bread together, nourish body and soul, and in the words of the psalm, "taste and see that the Lord is good."

As my kids would say: "NOT!" This dream is certainly not our family reality. Some families eat dinner one at a time, an arrangement made possible by frozen foods and microwave ovens. Others eat together but in a rush, unaware that something special is going on. In our house, we all try to consume food at the same table at more or less the same time while speaking a few reasonable words to one another. Some nights we achieve a great deal more; some nights less.

From my studies of religion, I know that sharing food is potent, laden with meaning. After the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, Jews began to treat their own family dinner table as the altar, their meal as the sacred occasion at which they met God. The salting of meat reminds us of the preparation of the sacrifice. In Christianity, the breaking and sharing of bread is the central rite. According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus

returned from the dead and sat among his disciples he did not immediately offer great metaphysical truths. In fact, his first interest was rather basic. "Does anyone have anything to eat?" he asked. To become companions literally means to share bread together. And the Hindu master Vivekananda said, "First bread, and then religion."

Nina, the Amish woman who threw her clothes out the train window as she left her community, knows about the power of eating. She still lovingly returns to her home to visit family and friends who lovingly welcome her. When it is time to eat, however, a separate table must be set for Nina. According to the time-honored laws of shunning passed down through the generations in an oral tradition, Amish people may not dine with those who have been excommunicated. The tradition, although more rigid and exclusive than many of us would like, underscores how intimate an act it is to share a meal.

For some families, transforming eating into an occasion for spiritual sustenance comes naturally. When I was speaking in a small town in Minnesota, I met the wife of an Episcopal priest who told me about her family ritual. Every night she lights candles and puts church music on the stereo. Then she and her husband sit down quietly and graciously at opposite ends of the table. Having set the tone, they are then joined by the children.

One woman I spoke to grew up in a tightly knit community organized around a church. It was the custom among families in that church to read the Bible together after dinner. Everyone knew the rules. You would not think of calling someone between 7:00 and 7:30 in the evening. That time was claimed for the family, the Bible, and the Lord.

But few of us live in communities with established norms around family dinners; most of us make it up as we go along. Trish recalls that in her interethnic, somewhat eccentric childhood home, there was no formal talk of religion. But each night at dinner the family would hold hands and say, "Bon appetit," in as many languages as the people at the table knew. On a good night, with several guests, the litany would take quite a while. Once completed, people felt connected, ready to share their food and themselves.

Some families begin their ritual life when their children come home from nursery school with prayers they have learned. For example, Lee told me, "Our daughter said a prayer at nursery school before snack: 'Isn't it nice to eat with friends?' She liked it so much she insisted on doing it at home. So we held hands and said, 'Isn't it nice to eat with family!' We started off saying it really fast and kind of embarrassed, but the baby would look up and beam. When our daughter switched nursery schools, we switched prayers. Now we said, 'God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food.' My husband and I would look at each other and think, 'What are two atheists doing praying nightly?' But we wanted some small way to celebrate our lives. By now, we all look forward to our evening prayer. We even light a candle, which has an amazingly calming effect. Everyone makes eye contact, and we slow down internally. It is a time of connection, of touching base."

Still, you are wondering, who can gather the whole family for a home-cooked dinner every night of the week? For many families, including my own, there is a middle ground: one night a week is special. One night a week, with or without community support, the family claims a holy time for themselves. Said Lyn, "My dad was a doctor and he was rarely home for dinner. But Friday night was different. Our family revolved around Friday night. When I was old enough to talk, my first questions were: Is it Friday yet? How much longer till Friday? That was how I began the process of conceptualizing time. Friday night we all ate dinner together and performed some of the rituals of the Sabbath. It was the scaffolding of our family, the centerpiece of the family life."

Fred spent his childhood in a chaotic, emotionally confused home. He explained, "We never ate together, except by chance. I determined that when I had children it would be different. I wanted to give my son the sense of rhythm that I had missed so much. At first, I thought we would have a ritual: an orderly breakfast and dinner at the same time each morning and night. But as the years passed, life became more complicated. We began our days at different times. The kids had different activities in the afternoons. The one thing we held on to was Sunday dinner."

Many people have powerful memories of special dinners. Karen recalls that as a little child it was her job to pick flowers and put them on the table before Sunday dinner. For Mark, the special family time was Saturday night. The rest of the week was variable, but Saturday night was "sacred." The family always enjoyed steak, French-fried onion rings, string beans, popcorn, and each other. Regular Friday night dinners punctuated Vicki's

childhood. The family would light candles and name all the relatives who had died or were far away. When she thinks back to her childhood, the memory of all those dinners, each alike in their ritual sameness, merge together into a warm glow.

Violet remembers Sunday nights at her Aunt Jane's. "It was solid and safe, the place to be. It was the right thing to be doing." In Violet's Bible is the handwritten copy of the prayer her family has said for three generations at the Sunday dinner table. She knows it by heart. Divorced now, without children at home, on Sunday nights Violet makes herself a nicer than usual dinner, sets the table for one, and reads the prayer aloud to herself.

Breaking bread together is a classic opportunity to express gratitude. Christians say grace before a meal and Jews after it is over. Muslims begin a meal with the same words they use to begin any task, "In the name of God, the all-Merciful, the Compassionate," and the more observant will end the meal with the verse that follows that one in the Koran, "Praise to God, the Lord of all the worlds." When I spent some time among Zen Buddhists, I loved their simple grace before meals, which included these words:

> *Innumerable labors brought*
> *us this food.*
> *The work of many people*
> *and the suffering of other forms*
> *of life.*

The volumes of mealtime prayers could be succinctly summarized: thank you. Deep in our primitive selves, we are all afraid of starving to death alone. When we sit down with others to eat, the ancient wisdom tells us to notice and be glad.

Cathy told me that when it comes to spiritual life, gratitude is her path. "When I was a young mother, before I knew anything about prayer or meditation, my 'spiritual practice' was photography. I was always grabbing the camera and trying to capture moments. When the kids were all dressed up and their shoes shined or when one child had a look of complete joy on her face, I would run for the camera. I think of those photos now as my blessings, uttered before I knew about blessings or how to say them. They were an effort to freeze time and say, This is worthy of being acknowledged. Thank you. I didn't yet have a sense of whom or what I was thanking."

Sometimes when I talked to people about their childhood, they would say that their parents had no explicit religious interests. Then they would add, "But deep inside, my mother was a very religious person." When I tried to probe what that meant, I got a sense it had something to do with the person's attitude toward life, a kind of humility. One woman recalled, "My mother never sat down and talked to me about what she believed. I don't recall anything like that ever happening. But she had a lot of phrases that she always used in her conversation. She would say, 'We're going to a party Sunday, if God wills it.' I don't think she believed that literally (why would God, if He existed, *not* want us to go to the party?), but it was an expression of an attitude. She taught me never to take anything for granted, to see it all as a gift."

Parents experience gratitude as a result of their children; they also try to teach their children gratitude. How does one teach children to feel grateful, or at least to say "thank you"? "It is easy," says Miss Manners. "You tell them once when they are young. Then you repeat it five hundred thousand times a year until they turn eighteen."

Some parents teach their children gratitude through the act of noticing, through saying a blessing or a prayer. "To eat something without saying a blessing is like stealing," Ken was taught. Or as Alice Walker put it, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice." As a father, Ken would take walks with his daughter and whenever they saw something beautiful Ken would say a blessing. "Now my daughter looks for things to bless too."

Children seem to take quickly to the idea of blessings. In Jewish traditions, it is written that a person should say a minimum of one hundred blessings a day. Children understand. One young girl I interviewed told me that her mother taught her to say a blessing before she ate anything at all. She confided, "My mother doesn't know this, but when I feed my cat I always say a blessing for him before he eats. It's only fair."

Jews recite the *shehechianu* blessing whenever something is done for the first time, or for the first time in a season or year. The blessing thanks God for "keeping us alive, sustaining us, and enabling us to be here to experience this moment." Jackie was taught to say this blessing the first time in a season she ate a particular fruit or vegetable. It was one of the few surviving rituals

in her family's Judaism. She has continued the custom, adding the first time they go swimming in the ocean each summer. To Jackie's great delight, the first time her daughter whistled, out came the blessing from her daughter's mouth! And Jackie repeated it, for it was the first time her daughter had said *shehechianu* on her own—certainly an occasion for blessing.

Batya was overwhelmed with two small children and a part-time baby-sitter "who also seemed to need a lot of care." One Friday, Batya announced to her husband that she was going AWOL. She got into the car, drove to the seashore, and went for a long walk alone by the beach. Then she entered a restaurant and ordered a split of champagne and a whole lobster—a great way to "act out" for Batya, who had always observed the Jewish laws concerning unclean animals. When she put the first fork full of lobster in her mouth, Batya found herself uttering the *shehechianu* blessing. It was, after all, the first time she had ever eaten this food! The system from which she was fleeing had overtaken her. Monday morning, Batya was back at her post.

Gratitude is also about thanking one another. Ironically, the people in our lives we are least likely to thank and appreciate are the people closest to us.

In Jewish homes, each Friday night the husband traditionally reads to his wife the passage from Proverbs about "the woman of valor." While often dismissed as pedestal polishing, this simple act is instructive. Would it be so terrible if we all told our spouses once a week what we appreciated about them? Or our children? In some homes, families go around the table each evening and share "something new and good today." Thanking is a way of life; praise is a habit. For many families, ritual is one way to create a culture of appreciation.

Simply dressing up for an occasion is a sign of respect. What a revelation to realize we can do that for our own families! Shoshana Silberman, a Jewish educator, writes that she always prepared a festive Sabbath dinner for her family, whether or not guests were invited. One of her children said to her, "You must think we kids are pretty important if you put out your best silver just for us."

For people who have a dinner routine, daily or weekly or less frequently, the routine is more important than the food. Marvin's family observes Friday night dinner in a special way. "Shabbat dinner is important because we always do it. We always have the same food. We always discuss whether to sing the long or the short blessing over the wine. We always decide on the short one. It's a sure thing."

Ritual adds majesty to the ordinary act of eating a meal. Part of the traditional Jewish dinner is the ritual washing of the hands with a prescribed three rinses and a special cup. This ritual recalls the hand washing of the priests before they partook of the sacrificial meal in the Temple in Jerusalem. The family dinner table symbolizes the altar. This hand washing is not about physical cleaning. It is about intention.

Ellen began observing a ritual hand washing with her children before dinner when they were quite young, although she was not sure they would understand what it was all about. After they washed and said the blessing, her four-year-old looked up with her face beaming and said, "I feel even cleaner than if I washed my hair!" Said Ellen, "I realized that when it came to ritual, my daughter really got it!"

This doesn't mean parents always find it easy to engage children in their agenda for the dinner celebration. One mother explained, "It was always really important for me that Friday dinner be an oasis in time, a special chance at living on a higher, holier level than the rest of the week. When my kids were little, I wanted this to happen so much that I worked and worried all day Friday to have it go off in a flawless way. I'd even check the silverware to make sure the pieces were all lined up, something I never did during the week. Of course, when it came time to gather at the table, the kids would fight terribly—no worse than they fought the rest of the week, but it would hurt more. It was usually an enormous disappointment; I would often end up in tears.

"But we just kept at it, and eventually they learned and I learned. They learned that at least half the time they could be little princes in a royal court for ten minutes, and something rather beautiful would happen. And I learned that at least half the time I just couldn't control life enough to have it my way, and I'd have to let go of my fantasy and enjoy whatever happened."

Another mother came up with a solution that worked for her. "When my kids were little, they resisted our special Sunday dinner, perhaps just because they sensed it was so important to me and they needed a way to rebel, to separate from me. When Sunday night came, they would be grouchy rather than pleasant. I decided to bribe them by having better food on Sunday nights, desserts that weren't offered the rest of the week.

It worked! It gave them a focus when they were young. As they got older, the other aspects began to make sense to them."

John had a different approach. "Our kids learned religion by acting. When our children were already in elementary school, my wife and I decided to begin observing the Sabbath with a Friday night ritual dinner. At first it felt awkward; the kids were not at all sure they wanted to be part of this. So we started inviting over other families, people who knew even less than we did about the rituals. Now my kids became the show-offs—acting 'as if' all this were natural and helpfully explaining everything to the guests. I've heard people say, 'Fake it till you make it.' It works. Pretty soon, the ritual was natural for us. Even when there was no audience, the kids performed the script and felt good about it. In the beginning, we needed the audience to make us less embarrassed in front of each other."

Families without a weekly dinner ritual still have special dinners, such as holidays when, as the poet Linda Pastan wrote about the Passover seder, we "set our table with metaphor." Some families enjoy special dinners around their birthdays, their ancestors' birthdays, or their pets' birthdays. Others have holidays unique to their own family, such as the Jewish clan I know who celebrate "What's-a-Jew-to-Do-Day" (otherwise known as December 25).

Dinnertime is often the moment when people gather and note whatever special event has occurred within the family. One mother told me, "When my daughter got her period for the first time, she was embarrassed and didn't want it discussed. But we bought some flowers and put them at her place at the table. Then we lit candles and had a nicer than usual dinner that night. Not a word was uttered. It was our way of saying it was a special night for all of us."

Thanksgiving dinner is, of course, the premier example of this combination of food, family, and gratitude. One mother I met writes notes to each family member on Thanksgiving, detailing all that she is thankful for about that person and her relationship with them. A Jewish family I know, echoing the custom of hiding a piece of matzah that enchants children at seders, instituted the custom of hiding the wishbone of the turkey. The popularity of Thanksgiving is attributable to its simplicity. There is no esoteric ritual or complicated liturgy. You count your blessings and enjoy your food. Feasting together makes us feel safe.

I have been moved by the way in which ritual behavior is alive and well in families. All over America, people bake birthday cakes, decorate them, light candles, make wishes, blow out candles. This isn't in any religious tome. Someone made the whole thing up to punctuate the birthday meal, to make it special. In the American Jewish community, there is a custom that builds on the birthday-candle routine. As a rabbi, I held one opinion of this ritual. As a student of the spiritual lives of families, I have come to a very different judgment.

This particular custom does not take place in the synagogue, where thirteen-year-olds traditionally mark their coming of age by being called to the Torah for the first time. In fact, it has nothing to do with the Torah. It occurs at the festive meal that follows the service. The child calls up thirteen relatives or friends to light the candles on the birthday cake. Since it is usually Saturday afternoon and still the Sabbath, the candle lighting is actually contrary to Jewish law. This ritual of unknown origins (rumor attributes it to a caterer on Long Island in the 1950s) is so popular and so meaningful to some Jews that it feels as emotionally important as the Torah service.

As a rabbi, I disapproved of the whole matter. I thought family and friends should be honored as part of the service in the synagogue, not in a "meaningless" American custom of lighting candles on a cake. But looking at it from the point of view of American Jews, the ritual makes all kinds of sense. The meal is an important time of sharing and celebrating—it should have a ritual component. Further, the thirteen-year-old wants to honor those people who are most important in his or her life. They may include, among others, children who are too young to participate in a long, boring service (and it is not only the very young who have this problem!), non-Jewish friends and relatives who often will not be allowed a part in the synagogue proceedings, an elderly grandmother who will not join in the service because she still believes it is "really" for men. But everyone can light a candle. And everyone does! Families wanted to be sure all the treasured friends and family got into the act. They were right to take things into their own hands.

Sometimes, gratitude is evoked in the most unlikely ways—not at a life-cycle passage but on an ordinary, even difficult day.

Susan was raised in a halfhearted Christian home with no observance of religion except once or twice a year. As an adult she joined a church, but "the classes were too intellectual and the spiritual programs too outer space." As she put it, "I just didn't get it. I couldn't find my place in the religious scene. I also did a lot of searching in the psychological sphere: est,

twelve steps, therapy. Why wasn't I happier? Why did I keep switching jobs? Why did I overeat?

"Later, I had my perfect family—one boy, one girl, a house in the suburbs, a husband who came home for dinner at six. I kept up with the church but only for the sake of the children. Spirituality was a nonissue for me. My third child was unplanned. When he was born physically and mentally handicapped, I crashed. I sank into a deep depression. Pulling myself out, I started to walk through my life again. I would take Josh to the supermarket, and well-meaning strangers would come up to me and say, 'God knew what he was doing in giving you this special child.' I found that so unacceptable, I wanted to throw a can of beans at them.

"Josh is now three. Sometimes when it is dinnertime and I'm too tired to get the food on the table, I think I'm finally going to give up. Just then, Josh toddles into the kitchen all hugs and smiles. What was it I was looking for in spirituality? I can't remember. There's nothing to search for—it's all right here. I have everything I ever wanted in life, everything that life could offer, right here in this moment of pure love. *In this moment.* I am flooded with blessing, awash in gratitude. I know it doesn't make any sense. Why am I learning gratitude from the child who poses the most problems for me? He keeps reminding me what a gift life is. I don't know why. I can only tell you that is what happened."

Gratitude is not about perfection but about noticing how blessed we are. Saying thanks is not always about feeling thankful. Sometimes it is a way of creating an inner shift. One of my students said, "When you get older, joy becomes a decision, celebration a conscious choice." Richard told me about his childhood as a very poor farm boy. The family would sit at the table, their heads bowed, and his mother would say, "This food may not be what we want, and it may not be how much we want, but we still should give thanks for it being here." Then they would dig in to their meal of potatoes or cabbage. Dorothy, also from a poor family, told me that her father never failed to say grace. Together, they would pray, "May we see thy goodness in our daily bread."

One woman reported with shame about a time when she realized how much her young son needed to learn. It occurred to Rose that it would be nice to bring a turkey to a homeless shelter on Thanksgiving Day. She told her five-year-old about the idea. He replied quickly, with a bright look on his face, "We don't need to do that! If those people have to live in a shelter, then they don't have anything to be thankful for. So they don't need to celebrate Thanksgiving!"

"I was devastated by that remark," Rose confessed. "I realized that the kid was smart but that he lacked compassion. He was more interested in the clever retort than in helping people. How glad I was that I had decided to do this Thanksgiving turkey project! It was not a minute too soon!"

As I thought about this story, I realized how Rose's little boy had unwittingly provided the opening for a teaching about what gratitude is all about. Because the truth is, people in shelters *do* celebrate Thanksgiving, as do people in cancer wings of hospitals and all kinds of other difficult circumstances. When Seth and I visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., we were both transfixed by a particular survivor speaking to us on an oral history video. We were so moved we watched the whole video through so we could hear his words a second time. The old man, recalling his time in Auschwitz fifty years ago, tells about hearing the man next to him in the barracks praising God. "I could not believe it! I asked him, 'Why would you thank God in this hell? What in the world are you thanking God *for?*' Do you know what that man told me? He said, 'I am thanking God that I was not created like the murderers around me.' "

Those of us who eat dinner in our homes with our families sometimes find it easy to catalog our complaints. But people in the most difficult straits are moved to give thanks for that which is good in their lives. Whether our dinner is simple or elaborate, peaceful or chaotic, daily or weekly, how much more should we acknowledge and bless whatever forces there are that we have been kept alive, sustained, and enabled to be here to experience this moment!