

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Thanksgiving

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My earliest memories of my extended family have to do with food. There were the great family festivals on holidays and the routine Sunday afternoon dinners where everybody gathered around one table and laughed and drank and told stories. Most often, we gathered at my grandparents' house, which was big enough to hold everybody. Our eating rituals were like religious processions that stopped at certain points along the way. We began on Granddad's back porch, where the adults drank whiskey, and as the smells of dinner cooking signaled that the meal was approaching, we moved into the huge kitchen that was too warm to stay in for long. There, the adults, flushed with whiskey and the heat of the oven, raised the decibel level. When the time was right, we moved to the large table in the formal dining room off the kitchen to eat, then afterward to the living room to digest.

Thanksgiving was the best dinner of all. That's when all the out-of-town relatives arrived, making the holiday a real family reunion. Preparations always began well before dawn, and when I was a little boy, too young yet for school, I would stay with my grandmother the night before. Her bustling in the kitchen would alert me to the fact that it was time to put the turkey in the oven, and I sleepily joined her so I could watch. Sometimes, when she had finished, she would sit at the table with me, and as she had her coffee and I had hot chocolate, we would look at the Sears catalog — her “wish book,” she called it. And we would pick out all the wonderful things we would buy if we had the money. But when you're wishing, money is no object.

To this day, I know of no smell more wonderful than that of a Thanksgiving dinner cooking. It smells of good things to come. Not just food but family and laughter. Grandmother cooked the turkey for so many hours that the meat literally fell off the bones. It was dry, of course, but with enough gravy, one never noticed. And Grandma was always chosen to cook the turkey until once, much later in her life, after her eyesight had failed, she cooked it with the plastic wrap still on it.

Everyone had a role to play. My great-aunt, who was not much of a cook, could only make something called “scalloped” corn, cans of corn topped with heavy cream and cooked for as long as it took to clabber the cream. So that's what she brought to every family meal, along with some lime-green jello with fruit suspended in it. The day before, my mom had started cooking the green beans with lots of bacon or a ham hock. By the time we sat down to eat, the beans were nearly cooked away and dissolved in our mouths. I've since learned to cook my beans “al dente.” I'm afraid my mother would ask me when I was planning to finish cooking them! There was lots of hustle and bustle in the kitchens in our respective homes as each person created her own special dish. I say “her” advisedly, because none of the men had any idea of what to do in the kitchen. Their job was to wander in from the back porch where they were telling stories, look at the activity in the kitchen, say “Uhhh, that really smells good,” and take an appreciative bite of whatever they were offered.

Thanksgiving Day followed a predictable pattern, as if someone had printed a program in advance and sent it out to all participants. We first went to church. Grandmother and Great-Aunt Susie saw to that. I know the priest always liked Thanksgiving because on that day, my family filled half the church; it must have felt like heaven to him.

Then came the Thanksgiving Day football game between Monett and Aurora, 13 miles away. My memory is that the weather was always bitterly cold and sometimes it snowed, and there was a cloud over the spectators, formed by their collective breaths that smelled of alcohol and cigarettes. After the game, we returned to our cars, and the Thanksgiving procession wound its way to grandmother's house for dinner.

Many years later, as I began to tell the stories of my family, those Thanksgiving dinners came back to me as symbols of that Holy Meal I celebrated every Sunday in my congregation. My grandfather was the priest. He sat at the head of the table and solemnly carved the turkey as the people gathered. My sister and I recited the "Prayers of the People" as we said grace before the meal. Grandmother and Great-Aunt Susie were the acolytes. I never remember them sitting down. They were always on their feet. If something was empty, they would fill it up. If something spilled, they mopped it up. I don't even remember them eating, though I'm sure it must have happened.

The meals were always memorable. Each Thanksgiving, my dad was the one chosen to say these words: "This is the best turkey we've ever had." It was always amazing to me that the turkeys got better every year — even the year my grandmother began to go blind and cooked the turkey while it was still in the plastic bag. I find myself carrying on that tradition. Each year, I tell my family that this year's turkey is surely better than all the rest. Echoes of my father.

When I was young, I don't think I ever left my grandmother's house while awake. It would always be late, and my sister and I would curl up on the sofa till Daddy wrapped us in our coats and carried us out into the dark night where our breath made little clouds. Another Thanksgiving past. Next year's would be the best we'd ever have.

Looking back on those days, I know that we were, above all, celebrating the spirit of family at those festivals. Family had a larger meaning for us. It didn't simply relate to mom, pop and the kids, but involved all the relatives doing their jobs to contribute to the family's identity.

I know I can't bring back the past, or recreate the same surroundings I experienced as a child, but my family didn't teach me to do that. Instead, they taught me that next year's turkey will be better than all the rest. That, for me, is the meaning of hope. Something wonderful is always out there on the horizon waiting for us, and it will be better than anything we've experienced in the past. Just this Thanksgiving, my daughter Liz looked across the table and said, "I suppose you're going to say this is the best turkey we've ever had."

And I did.



A former clown, college chaplain, and parish priest, David Fly took the early retirement option in 1998 after thirty-three years in the active ministry. He and his wife, Adrienne, have five daughters and live in Rolla, Missouri. They are on the teaching staff of the Church Pension Fund's Planning For Tomorrow conferences and lead clergy and spouse conferences on life in the ministry. This article is an excerpt from David's memoir, *Faces in the Rearview Mirror*, which will be published in spring 2004 by Church Publishing Incorporated.