

Tradition: An important element of the family fabric

During my many years of family practice, nothing was more heartwarming, joyous, or angelic than starting each Christmas morning checking on my new patients who were just beginning their life in this world. Every year, the nursery in my hospital wraps the newborn babies in Christmas stockings, securing their position as the cutest bundles of joy ever. With the closing of my practice, I have no pressing need to check on the newest members of society, as cute as they are, but I'm so happy that I got to partake in that tradition for over 30 years.

As many of you know, one of the great benefits of being a doctor is receiving gestures of kindness from patients, usually in the form of baked goods and chocolate. Many of these gifts stayed at the office for my staff to enjoy, while some made their way home to my family. It's a great feeling to know your patients appreciate you and the work you do taking care of them, and receiving their expressions of gratitude each year at Christmas-time is another tradition that will be changing for me.

Christmas has always been a family time for us. Christmas has many special meanings for me—the camaraderie I feel when my family is all together, the overall uplifting and optimistic feeling I get from hearing holiday music playing everywhere, the prevalence of Christmas decorations, the invigorating chill in the winter air, and the reminder that we are blessed to live in a democratic society where we can enjoy life's basic freedoms.

I am sure that my colleagues of different faiths, whose beliefs and traditions are just as special to them, share the same feelings.

Holiday traditions in my family

begin on Christmas Eve, when we hang our stockings above the fireplace and get everything ready for the big day following. Sometimes family traditions are started with very simple practical considerations—for instance, because I have the biggest table, Christmas dinner has always been held at my house. Of course Christmas wouldn't be complete if I didn't threaten to get rid of that table for one reason or another (a running joke in our household each year).

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On Christmas morning, after my run to the hospital to check that tomorrow's leaders and their families are enjoying their first Christmas, we settle down to open presents. Like most people, I love the giving aspect of Christmas—the look on my family members' faces when they receive a gift they had hoped for, and the sound of rustling paper, laughter, and chit-chat. Gift opening is accompanied by the smell of breakfast cooking. My family's traditional breakfast is simple: scrambled eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes and baked beans—basic and tasty.

With the arrival of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents around midday, turkey dinner is forthcoming. We like to have an early turkey dinner because that gives us more time for the fun stuff, like playing euchre—a fast, trump-taking card game—as well as some other games. We used to make sure to get at least one new game each Christmas, but we found we usually reverted back to the favorites, so we stopped that tradition. And of course no Christmas would be complete without watching National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation* starring Chevy Chase at least once. We recite all the classic lines, laugh at the antics of our favorite characters, and cheer when Clark Griswold's Christmas turns out okay in the end. The bottom line is, we all enjoy just being together. The big difference now is there will be no challenge to see if we can get through Christmas dinner without a phone call urging me to the hospital to deliver a baby.

Christmas is a time to reflect—on the preceding year, past Christmases, relationships, and hopes for the future. And we spend the day making new memories that we will reflect on in the years to come. When we link the present with the past and the future through tradition, we create a sense of stability and order. Christmas traditions are an important element of the family fabric, bringing us together even when our favorite people move far away and at some point begin their own traditions.

I wish you and your family a very happy Christmas. May your traditions be celebrated with love, laughter, and hope.

—Shelley Ross, MD
President