

Families and holidays: do they mix?

To family or not to family — that was the holiday question many Lake Oswegans recently faced. With a mix of native Oregonians and transplants living in our town, the answer is quite varied. Separated by hundreds or thousands of miles, some of us may not have had a choice to spend the holidays with our extended families. Separated by no more than a short car ride, some of us may not have had a choice not to. And despite our circumstances, some of us may have chosen how we wanted to spend the holidays based on our own expectations and family dynamics.

"Next year we'll be doing things differently," my sister confessed to me over the phone on Christmas as she holed up in her pantry closet to find a quiet place to talk to me across the miles from California. The rest of my family (18 to be exact) had converged at her place for the annual get-together that can leave families feeling nourished or frustrated depending on a long list of variables.

As I listened to her and pictured the chaos, I felt grateful for having the excuse of distance to keep me home alone with my own immediate family. It's not that I don't love my brothers and sisters. It's just that I like my Christmas to be a silent night, not a chaotic one.

For the first five years of their marriage Carol and Jerry Raymond did the holiday shuffle between in-laws as they lived practically next door. Since moving to the West Coast 10 years ago, they've es-



HOME WITH A VIEW
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established a new tradition of staying home for Christmas and saving the family visits for the summer. "I much prefer visiting that time of year," says Raymond, "when there aren't 50 people in the house making it hard to really visit anyone."

Although she admits to feeling a bit sentimental about the big family dinners, she confesses that there are more things she likes about celebrating the holiday on her own. "We can form our own traditions," she explains, in direct contrast to those first few years when they didn't even have their own tree. Instead of rushing from one family's house to another, they can enjoy Christmas with their kids and some surrogate parents/grandparents they've

adopted. "We've made some close friends here that we consider family," Raymond says. "It's nice to be able to choose your family and not deal with the petty problems that can crop up." She and her husband do call and connect with their relatives on the holiday, but it's always nice when they hang up and realize "we're not doing their dishes all day long."

Out of nine kids, Sarah Duwelius is the only one who doesn't live in Iowa anymore and consequently has missed some of the Christmas get-togethers. The first year she didn't go home, she was sure she was going to cry before Christmas Day was over. She missed the feeling of being with family, which in her case includes over 50 relatives (and, on Christmas Eve, 24 kids all in the same house). She got through it and now prefers spending Thanksgiving in Iowa and Christmas in Oregon. "We've started our own traditions here," she says. "And I love being the hostess and cooking our own holiday meal instead of being a guest for 10 days with three kids in tow."

For Cheryl Bell, however, it seems the more the merrier. Carrying on a 60-year family tradition, her father's relatives gather the Sunday before Christmas as one of two annual reunions (the other is in the summer). For those of us who long for silent nights during our holiday season, the thought of 120 to 150 family members under one roof may sound more like a cause to flee than to party. But Bell wouldn't have it

any other way and neither would her kids.

"You get the feeling of your heritage continuing," she says. Her children begin to understand and appreciate what family really means. As if that weren't enough, Bell gets together with 60 of her immediate relatives on Christmas Eve for dinner and a gift exchange. And on Christmas Day, it's over to her folks for brunch. When asked about private family time, Bell explains that she gets that Christmas afternoon and evening by staying home and cooking her own dinner. "Other family members can join us," she adds, "but we stay put."

While I felt Bell offered a glimpse of what is often posed as the traditional holiday ideal, I felt exhausted after talking with her. Fortunately my family isn't that large or that close. Give them to me in bits and pieces, but don't give them to me in a big crowd during an already hectic season and expect me to feel merry. During the holidays it's always a challenge to find the tradition and family mix that fits our individual style. Some of us have found it. But for those of us who are still searching there is always hope, because "next year we'll be doing things differently."

To everything there is a season. For some of us the holidays are a season to get together with family. For some of us they are not.

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