

A Different Thanksgiving

For one family, departing from tradition restored full meaning to the holiday.

By Joy Imboden Overstreet

Illustrated by Rob Sauber

As a descendent of one of the Mayflower Pilgrims and a New Englander by upbringing, I used to feel beholden to my Pilgrim ancestors to produce a traditional turkey with all the trimmings each Thanksgiving. But one afternoon in mid-November three years ago, my youngest child, Ethan, then seven, burst in from school, slammed his empty lunchbox down on the counter where I was rolling out pastry for our Thanksgiving pies, and demanded to know why I was making yucky pumpkin pie again. "I hate pumpkin pie!" he said. "And I don't like sweet potatoes or cranberry sauce or stuffing, either."

Somewhat nonplussed, I explained that it was traditional to serve these foods. Our guests expected Thanksgiving to be a certain way each year, and I didn't want to disappoint them.

Ethan's sister, Heather, who was ten, joined the conversation. "I like turkey okay," she said, "but Aunt Ethel is so boring. All she ever talks about is her arthritis. Jamie always pulls my hair and Sandy breaks one of my toys every year. How come we have to invite them?"

Ethan realized he had an ally, so he pressed a little further. "If you like Thanksgiving so much, how come you get so cranky getting ready for it?"

This was true. It wasn't easy for me, a single working mother, to throw a midweek party for twenty distant relatives with whom blood seemed to be the only connection.

I rolled and rerolled my piecrust. I knew it would get tough with too much handling, but I needed time to formulate my response. Calling upon one of my more useful parental ploys, I turned the problem back to the children. "If you don't like our Thanksgiving, have you got a better idea?"

"I'm thinking," said Heather. "Something about being thankful."

Ethan interrupted. "In class today we made a list of things we're thankful for, and you know what I said?" Without waiting for a guess, he exclaimed, "Pizza!"

"That's a good idea," I said. "Let's make a list of the things we're thankful for."

I got a pencil and some paper.

"Pizza."

"Having each other."

"Twerple" (our cat).

"Being healthy."

"The beautiful fall weather."

"I can run, jump, see, smell, taste."

"Living near the park."

"Pizza."

"You already said that, silly!"

Pizza seemed important. An idea started to take shape in my mind: "If you could have Thanksgiving be any way you wanted it, how would it be?"

"It would be just the three of us," said Heather.

"Pizza," said Ethan, "and a giant salad bar with croutons and garbanzo beans and bacon and sunflower seeds."

"Star Wars," Heather added. "You haven't seen it, so we'll take you."

I proposed a hike to start the day off, and even that idea was greeted with enthusiasm.

I persuaded my sister to take on the guests I was uninviting, then we carefully planned our day so that each of us could choose a food and an activity, with the understanding that we would all embrace the others' choices, *no moaning allowed*.

Our day of thanks arrived, crystal clear and properly autumnal. Before we left for our hike I prepared the pizza dough, the children grated cheese and assembled ten little bowls of assorted vegetables for the salad bar. Never have I had such willing helpers.

Since they had chosen the pizza and salad bar, I got to choose the dessert—old-fashioned apple brown betty. We would bake it when we returned so it would still be warm when we ate it.

On the trail I breathed deeply of the pine-scented air and admired the sparkling bay below while the children scrambled around in search of table decoration materials—pine cones, dry oak leaves, and a few late-blooming flowers. They were so engrossed that we covered four miles of hilly terrain without a single complaint.

When we got back to the house I lit a fire as the children adorned the table with their findings. Since the menu was a joint creation it was more satisfying than any five-course turkey feast had ever been. The glow of the fire and our feelings of closeness were so soothing that we barely made it to the theater in time for *Star Wars*.

Thanksgiving has not been the same for us since. Last year at our pre-holiday conference we decided we were most thankful for having friends to do things with. So we invited many of them over for a special kind of potluck. Instead of bringing finished dishes just prior to the meal, everyone brought the raw ingredients and we spent a hilarious morning concocting dishes far more interesting than any of us could have produced alone.

It looks as if we're coming full circle this year. We've decided we're most thankful to have been raised in a country where there is so much for which to be thankful. We're going to recreate a Pilgrim celebration!

The family conference is now standard before any event of consequence. Our celebrations are never the same, but, then, we change too. ●

Joy Imboden Overstreet is a free-lance writer who has recently completed a master's degree in public health at the University of California at Berkeley.

