

Thanksgiving Heroes

Of Pilgrims, Rockwell and Charlie Brown

by Andrew Stenhouse

The sorrow was so heavy it felt like I was wearing one of those protective lead X-ray vests. Taryn and Kayla, dressed up in their brown paper Indian vests and headdresses made out of shopping bags, were going home from their Thanksgiving play with their mom. I was going home to an empty apartment to watch the play all over again on video. It wasn't fair. There wasn't anything to be thankful for, and it certainly wasn't the Thanksgiving I had planned.

For many single parents, Thanksgiving isn't really giving thanks at all, but rather a time of forced smiles, overacting and make-believe joy. Sometimes we establish rituals that reflect desperation, as we do what we can to convince ourselves that we are living normal lives and that our children will be just fine.

Eventually, and quite miraculously though, we realize that we do live pretty normal lives, our children are doing just fine, and the meaningless rituals born out of desperation have become precious traditions that sustain our families for generations. It is only after we have had time to heal that we begin to feel truly thankful for so many things, especially our friends, our families and our faith. These are the secrets of Thanksgiving.

1. Keeping our friends: A lesson from a Pilgrim

Isaac Allerton was a 35-year-old single father at the very first Thanksgiving dinner in 1621. He had sailed to a new world on the *Mayflower* to begin a new life with his pregnant wife, Mary, along with their three children. The infant died at birth, and his wife died two weeks later. Despite the tragic loss, Isaac and his three children joined dozens of others for a celebration of thankfulness, less than a year after Mary's death.

He did begin a new life—just not the one he had planned. With the support from his friends and community, Isaac understood the strength that came from keeping his friends close.

I wish I had done that. Withdrawing from my friends after my divorce was the worst thing I could have done, yet that is exactly what I did. I tried to carry the burden alone and it got heavy, very heavy. When I finally confided in a few friends and asked for support and prayer, I collapsed both emotionally and physically. Instead of judgment and advice, I received understanding. I learned that I needed to keep my friends, keep them very close, let them encourage me, let them support me, let them share my whole life and not just the good parts. I needed to let my friends *be* my friends.

2. Keeping our family: A lesson from Norman Rockwell

Even Norman Rockwell, the portrayer of the American Family, had his

troubles to overcome. In fact, the life Rockwell illustrated could not have been more removed from his own. He illustrated life as it should be, certainly not as it really was. Rockwell, raised in a low-income neighborhood by unaffectionate parents, lived in the tiny room of a New York boarding house. Though his professional life flourished, his personal life never seemed to catch up to the image captured by his art. His first marriage ended in divorce before he was 30.

Driven to have the family life that eluded him as a child, Norman married his second wife, Mary Barstow and together they raised three boys. Losing his second wife to severe depression long before she passed away, Rockwell battled to hold onto the most important thing he had: his family. When he painted “Freedom from Want” (the popular painting still used to symbolize Thanksgiving today), his boys were ages 8 to 12. He understood the importance of family and, as a father, his work began to reflect his longing for it. This great Thanksgiving image is a grand portrait of three generations around a dinner table truly enjoying their blessings in 1944, a time of world tension and domestic uncertainty. Those who view the painting are made to feel as welcome as the guests at the table. We feel at home. We feel like family.

Just after my divorce, I called my mom to tell her I wasn't going to the family reunion in Oregon. I just couldn't face the entire family and all the imposing questions. I was too ashamed, too hurt, too angry, too tired.

Later on though, something told me that family was exactly what I needed. After a three-day road trip, Taryn, Kayla and I pulled into the Silver Falls

campground to experience the remarkable love of family; cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents—the family I had forgotten I had. It was a Rockwell moment. I was immediately embraced by family members who had only one question: “How are you?”

They didn’t want answers, explanations or excuses. Instead, they offered love, acceptance and encouragement. They were genuinely happy to see me. I was family.

3. Keeping our faith: A lesson from Charlie Brown

The divorce of Charles Schulz came as a surprise to many. A consummate family man and Sunday school teacher, the creator of Charlie Brown never imagined his marriage ending in divorce. But when, at the height of his career and with five children, his marriage failed, he had nowhere to turn except his faith.

As most now know, Schulz was Charlie Brown. “My whole life has been one of rejection,” he once confessed to a friend. His divorce was just one more rejection that seemed to match Charlie Brown’s lowered expectations.

As he worked on *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* just after his divorce, poignant lines such as Peppermint Patty’s admonition to Charlie Brown, “Let’s not play lovers’ games, Chuck,” made so much sense. Schulz was hurt, and when Marcie concludes the film by giving the true meaning of Thanksgiving, we experience Schulz’s commitment to his faith. “Thanksgiving is more than

eating. . . . The early Pilgrims were thankful for what happened *to* them. And we should be thankful too” [emphasis added]. He explains several times in the companion sequel, *The Mayflower Voyagers*, the Pilgrims’ faith in God was what made the difference. “Their belief in God. . . made their life-threatening journey a risk worth taking.”

His cartoon strip often revealed how Schulz’s faith in God gave him the courage to live a fruitful life. He remarried and went on to live a fulfilling life both personally and professionally, dying in his sleep the morning his final strip was printed. He kept his faith, and it was more than enough.

It is difficult to fully appreciate God’s constant nearness until we, like Schulz, have lived with rejection. I cannot begin to count the number of times I would slowly open the door to a quiet and empty apartment only to burst into tears at the silence. Eventually I would hear the Lord whisper the same comforting words, “I am here,” as if He were sitting in the shadowed corner waiting for me to come home. Actually, I think He often does that—waits for us to come home.

I think Allerton, Rockwell and Schulz were on to something. I think they knew the secrets of Thanksgiving: friends, family and faith. This holiday I plan to spend some time loving and being loved. I also plan to spend some quiet time letting the Lord whisper to me.

I plan to come home.

Andy Stenhouse will celebrate Thanksgiving in Costa Mesa, Calif.

Sidebar:

Keeping our faith, family and friends close to us through tragedy is sometimes easier said than done. Here are some practical tools to help you in your own journey:

Embracing faith: Do your best to be authentic with God. Write Him a letter, cry out with heartfelt passion, express all your hurt to Him. When we expose these things without holding back, it gives our relationship with God the chance to grow and deepen. He can't meet us in our hurt if we don't call it out to Him.

Embracing family: For some of us, family is a safe place to go. For others, it is not. Be wise in discerning about the family members to whom you can expose your heart. Begin with one safe person, open up, express your need and let him or her be there for you.

Embracing friends: Friendship goes both ways. Remember that a healthy friend will want to be there for you in your pain. We all need a shoulder to lean on sometimes and it's important to reach out when you are hurting. Set up a lunch date with a friend you trust, get together over coffee, invite him or her to your home. Start small and allow the relationship to build by setting regular times to get together.