

Gratitude: my recipe for a peaceful family holiday dinner

Growing up in an alcoholic family, I dreaded the holiday season. Mixing an alcoholic and three “reacters” rarely led to magical moments. Last year’s holidays were the hardest, as they were the first ones since the alcoholic in our family, my dad, died. My brother’s and my pain and mutual resentments were still raw, so we shared an awkward, tense dinner.

As this year’s holidays approached, I felt the familiar fear of family conflict and judgment. I tend to avoid whatever I fear, so I was reluctant to accept the challenge when my family asked me to host this year’s holiday dinner. I’m a self-conscious hostess at the best of times. However, I learned through Al-Anon that God gives us challenges when we’re ready for them. So I agreed to welcome my disconnected family into my home.

My program helped me change my attitudes and actions before the dinner. In particular, I learned that I needed to let go of my paralyzing fear of conflict and judgment.

First, I reflected on how far I had come in taking care of myself over the past year. I learned that I didn’t have to accept unacceptable behavior, such as hurtful comments or accusations from my relatives. I also learned how to set boundaries. Even though I feared my brother’s rage, I faced my fears by continuing to reach out to him, even if I only e-mailed him once a month. I learned how to build bridges between us rather than walls.

By declining to host our get-togethers, I saw that I was burdening my relatives. My fear of others’ judgment held me back from serving my family. Instead, I needed to share the responsibility for hosting our events. I also realized that I’m rather self-absorbed. The holidays aren’t about me and my cooking skills; they’re an opportunity to heal my family’s weakened sense of unity. My Sponsor put it best: I needed to let go of my ego.

I also learned that it was unfair to expect my brother’s resentment toward me to fade as quickly as I would have liked. He had every right to work through the grief and anger that our dad’s death brought about, in his own time. I needed to be patient, detach, and focus on myself. God gave me faith that my brother’s resentment toward me would eventually fade. Even if it didn’t, I could choose to act maturely and be my best self.

My Al-Anon program helped me remember that I’m not alone. God is always an available source of help. By working my program, I became willing to change. My attitude toward hosting the dinner evolved from, “Oh, heck no” to “Yes, I can!”

My strategy for success involved returning to the tools that helped me in recent months: prayer, preparation, and practice. Through prayer, I humbly asked God to help me face my fears. I knew I could not succeed—or relax—without God’s help, so I deliberately chose to “Let Go and Let God.”

I prepared emotionally by openly sharing those fears with my Sponsor, my group, and my husband. By communicating honestly, I became much closer to my husband. He became an enormous source of support. He helped me work through my trepidation and channel my energy into planning the menu several weeks in advance. Together, we practiced making every item on the menu and tweaked the recipes to our satisfaction. Cooking actually became a fun challenge that I embraced. I fell in love with my husband all over again.

All our efforts were worthwhile. My family’s holiday dinner was delightfully serene. I felt relatively relaxed and closer than ever to my husband. By placing “principles above personalities,” I was able to avoid reacting when my relatives made minor negative remarks. Instead, I kept my own thoughts positive by focusing on gratitude for my family’s drama-free reunion.

I feel grateful knowing that I did my best and applied the slogan “Let It Begin With Me.” My Higher Power helped heal my family by bringing us together in peace to mark a special occasion. I gained confidence and courage by taking the risk to try new things, knowing that I’m not alone. I could not have asked for a better holiday, and I truly believe that my dad would have been proud of all of us.

What a difference a year makes—when I work my program!

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