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Thanksgiving: A Multicultural Adventure?

By Susan Dunn

Thanksgiving: A Multicultural Adventure? by Susan Dunn, MA, cEQc, The EQ Coach

There we were, newly married, living thousands of miles from either of our homes, in Durham, NC where he was in medical school. My husband was from Texas, and I was from the North Shore of Chicago. We came from two different cultures ourselves, and now were together in a new one. It turned out to be culture shock on top of culture shock as we adjusted to each other, and to the cosmopolitan student body at Duke Medical School.

CULTURE IS LEARNED

Culture is something we learn. It isn't related to race or ethnicity, religion or anything else, but it pulls from all those groups, and, especially if we've only lived in one place, moved only in one social group, and/or haven't been exposed to other cultures, we tend to think of our own culture as sacred. However, so does the other person!

As we move into an exciting new world of global interaction, there are going to be culture clashes. Let's continue looking at this through my Thanksgiving Tale.

THE PLAYERS

The first Thanksgiving came around and friends from New England invited us over along with 6 other couples. Guests included a man from the Dominican Republic married to a woman from Spain; a couple from Missouri; a New York man married to a woman from Brazil; two French Canadians from Quebec; and two Australians who were not medical students, but neighborhood friends. Religions represented were Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. And, I should add, it included men and women.

As friends do, we all talked among ourselves both before the event, during and after. A lot of it had to do with figuring out what was going on with all these nationalities represented. We split into factions about what was "right" and what was "wrong," often changing sides with different issues.

TIME & COMMUNICATION

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"Why noon?" my husband asked. "When are we eating?" My husband liked everything organized with no surprises. I was more flexible, but willing to dive in and explore, so I called the hostess. "It's buffet," she said. I fished around for more information, like when were we expected to leave, and could I bring anything, hoping she'd reveal the menu. Her answers were typically New England, short and terse.

"You didn't find out anything?" my husband asked, when I returned empty-handed.

"She didn't volunteer anything," I said. "I did the best I could."

"Why didn't you just ask her the questions outright?" he said.

"Because that's rude," I said.

"You're too polite," he replied.

"Then next time you call," I said.

"That's the woman's job," he replied.

We and the Missourians arrived at noon:11, which was our cultural dictate; a few minutes late to allow the host and hostess to make last minute adjustments, but no more than 15. The French Canadians and the Australians arrived about 30 minutes later. The couples that included a Latino arrived an hour or two after noon.

"How rude," said the New Yorker. "How are we supposed to be able to plan? What do you do when you invite the Gonzalvos over?"

"Relax," said the Australians. "We've all got kids. Things happen."

The French Canadians spoke to each other in French, obviously disliking tardiness, then smiled and told us, "Isn't this a wonderful Thanksgiving," avoiding dissension.

The Latinos didn't appear to notice their wandering in was anything out of the ordinary They were busy hugging everyone and having a good time!

How we treat time varies greatly among cultures. We had had our cocktail hour by the time the Latinos arrived, and were ready to eat, but felt they should have time for a drink and some chatting also. It was an awkward moment. Somewhere also there was a football game involved, the timing of which got messed up.

"Don't worry about the football game," said the Dominican. "This is Thanksgiving."

"Thanksgiving IS the football game," my husband said to me, soto voce, angry over that and also because he hadn't had any food.

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THE ATTIRE

Everyone from the medical school contingent was dressed up, and in festive apparel. The Australians were in blue jeans. The social group also has a pull.

FOOD

At last we were invited to the buffet table. To me, it's a big part of the event, and I was aghast. Boiled onions in a cream sauce, a turnip casserole, a ham, tart cranberries just crushed and sitting in a bowl ... where was the turkey, the stuffing, the sweet cranberry jelly? I don't even remember what the dessert was, but it's for sure it wasn't the Ambrosia my Texas-mother fixed, or the Mince Meat pie my British-ancestored father demanded.

A conversation ensued about who has what for Thanksgiving, some of us trying to convince the non-American participants of what Thanksgiving was "really" like, i.e., not like this, but also not

agreeing among ourselves.

My husband and I went home feeling we hadn't had a Thanksgiving. I didn't get the meal, he didn't get the football game.

THE GRACE

Approaching the table, someone suggested a prayer of Thanksgiving. The host (the highest status male present) looked surprised so we all turned toward the most known-religious man in the room. However, the host evidently decided it was his job, and began a grace. I looked around. Some had their heads bowed in prayer; others were looking around the room, ill-at-ease.

AMBIANCE

When they first walked into the house, the US participants looked around as if something was missing. What was missing? There were no Thanksgiving decorations. Nor was there a host; the hosts' child opened the door and we went hunting for the couple.

"I miss my dad," the Missouri woman told me, an oblique reference to the greeting-situation. "He always greeted guests so warmly, with a hug and a big smile at the front door."

The Dominican-Spain couple missed music and dancing. "In my country we dance after dinner," he said. "Here, you sit and fall asleep."

He and the gentleman from Australia also stayed in the room where the women were after dinner; the rest of the guys went off to the rec room.

AFTERGLOW

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Conversations continued after the event. The upshot was we'd had a good time, good company, and didn't wish to appear ungrateful, but we all were left feeling "homesick." Next year we'd do our own Thanksgivings, we agreed.

However, the next year my husband and I found ourselves in the car Thanksgiving Day, on the way over to the house of a Pakistani couple.

"Why on earth would they invite us over for Thanksgiving?" my husband asked. "It's an American holiday."

"I think it's nice," I said. "They're going to live in the US and they want to join in and learn new ways. I just hope we have turkey."

"I just better get to watch the game this year," he added, ominously.

Over the chicken makhani and ras malai, unfortunately served during the last quarter of the football game, the Japanese woman on my right said, "So this is how you celebrate Thanksgiving here."

CULTURAL CHAOS

Interacting with other cultures is challenging, and requires a lot of emotional intelligence. It requires flexibility, creativity, empathy and interpersonal skills, plus a lot of understanding and a sense of humor. It forces us to focus on what's really important - the people or the details? It also brings us to a greater awareness of what our own culture is.

Emotional intelligence relies on self-awareness and then other-awareness and finding the common ground, with optimism and goodwill. Global emotional intelligence relies on own-culture-awareness, then other-culture-awareness, and then finding the common ground with optimism and goodwill.

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Thanksgiving Holiday History

By Mrs. Party Gail Leino

Thanksgiving Holiday History by

... Gail Leino

America celebrates Thanksgiving every year by festive family gatherings, traditional holiday meals and offering thanks for all good fortunes. The

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has a

history that dates back to early American settlers. These settlers were known as the Pilgrims and they were the first to have a

The Pilgrims came to America to escape religious persecution in England. They were granted free passage on the Mayflower on September 6th, 1620 as long as they would work in exchange for the next seven years. Unfortunately, the winter was so harsh that over half of the pilgrims didn't make it to the spring. Less than fifty Pilgrims survived the brutal winter out of 110, but poor health improved with the good spring to come.

The local native Americans taught the pilgrims about growing crops such as corn and what plants could be used for medicinal purposes. With The Native Americans help the Pilgrims had a good harvest in October. The Pilgrims invited local Native Americans and settlers to all feast in thanks for there bountiful harvest. They celebrated and feasted for three days and this became known as the first Thanksgiving in America.

President Lincoln would later declare Thanksgiving a National Holiday to be celebrated every fourth Thursday in November in 1863. We as Americans can all take pride and give thanks by enjoying this rich American tradition of a

with all our family and friends.

Mrs. Party... Gail Leino is the internet's leading authority on giving the best possible

, using proper

etiquette and manners while also teaching organizational skills and fun facts.

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How to Become a Woman of Thanksgiving

Thankfulness In Times Of Trouble

Thanksgiving Traditions of Gratitude

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