NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

How we see and know daily holiness

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Dec. 1, 2010 My Table Is Spread

From bedtime to Advent wreaths, ritual is part of the life of parenthood

When Americans say ?faith,? we often mean ?opinion,? or what we think about God. In truth, faith is a life, and lives are made up of actions, of deeds. Who cares what you think when a vomiting child wakes you at 3 a.m.? Who cares how you feel about it? Who needs your opinion on being startled from sleep by the sounds of retching from the crib? Only this matters: that you *do* get up and clean the mess and comfort the child.

Sleep interruptions are part of the life of parenthood. We know to keep the lights low and our voices soft. We know the power of touch and song and simple presence. ?Sh, Mama?s here. Mama?s here. Mama?s right here,? is a healing litany.

So I?m always surprised when the subject of domestic rituals come up in sacramental preparation classes, and parents, who do the daily work of parenting, tell me they can?t lead evening prayers or celebrate Advent blessings.

?I don?t know how to do rituals,? they say, or, ?I?m not a liturgist,? as if rituals were the property of a band of professionals and not simply the human work of human hands. Ritual is the way we mark the days and seasons and it helps us see and know daily holiness.

?Do you put your children to bed?? I ask the parents who claim ritual ignorance and ineptitude.

?Of course,? they answer.

?Then you perform a nightly ritual,? I tell them, ?and you do it so well your child will protest if anyone else steps in.?

We don?t explain night and sleep to children. We prepare them for night and sleep. We form them in trust and in hope.

Adults have so many ways to anesthetize themselves against the terrors of darkness. We have alcohol and television and barbiturates and the Internet and *People* magazine. Children have to take their darkness straight. They lose consciousness while watching familiar shapes dissolve into scary shadows. It?s disturbing enough to watch the closet disappear without also having to cope with bedtime innovations.

The nighttime routine is sometimes all that holds the fears from surrounding and overwhelming them. *This* blanket, and no other will do. *Goodnight Moon* and not some unknown story for bedtime; these songs, and those sometimes in a particular order for peace and rest. That bear, however mucous-encrusted and worn, is the only fit companion for the night.

Parents understand the force of right order and tone, of song and story and touch, of true and simple words said

often.

I don?t remember when we fell into the habit, but my youngest daughter, who fell in love early with Ludwig Bemelmans? *Madeline* books, still recalls the last words I would say as I closed her bedroom door. She lives far away now, but when we are together, in my home or hers, she will turn to me as we head for bed and say,

> Goodnight, little girl,
> Thank the Lord you are well.
> And now, go to bed, said Miss Clavell,
> And she turned out the light,
> And closed the door,
> And that?s all there is,
> There isn?t any more.

We know this isn?t the hour for loud noises or terrible tales -- and no wonder we who watch the late news need sleeping pills -- or bright lights. (Though I did have one child whose favorite lullaby was ?Chantilly Lace.? I do a fair imitation of the Big Bopper as he lets out a growl before singing, ?You know what I like,? to which my son would add, yawning and smiling, ?Legos.?)

Rituals are ways to move gracefully between sleep and waking, between day and night, between consciousness and sleep. Rituals allow us to part and come together again, allow us to gather for meals and separate for work. The small daily movements prepare us for the larger movements of our life, the one becoming two, the two becoming parents, the births and the deaths that are the rhythms of human life.

Rituals allow us to take part in the annual movements and migrations of the earth: Long days grow short as we leave home for work in darkness and return home from work in darkness. Then a lightness, almost imperceptible at first, begins, and the dead land is shot through with rising green.

In the dark weeks of Advent, Christians learn the wisdom that farmers have always known, that life stirs beneath the seemingly barren ground. Spring has not abandoned us; it is only waiting for its appointed time. We learn what we hope our children learn; if you cry out in the night, help will come. Someone is keeping watch.

Christians mark these dark days with lit candles and songs of longing and welcome, a declaration that, however deep the night, the light of Christ still shines, a light no darkness can extinguish.

The ritual is simple. Most Christmas tree lot owners are happy to sell inexpensive bundles of greenery for the wreath, and some owners will allow you to glean dropped and broken branches for free. Our wreath was never quite symmetrical, but it filled the kitchen with the smell of resinous evergreen boughs.

We always sing ?O Come, O Come Emmanuel,? and I always mean to move us through the verses as we approach the O Antiphons and Christmas, but then I always forget and we sing the first verse over and over for

weeks. My husband and I like ?Creator of the Stars of Night,? and ?Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus.? There?s not a tricky tune among those three hymns.

And, of course, there are the candles. Even the smallest child is drawn to lit candles in a dark room. Silently and without prompting, they move away from the shadows and toward the light; their movements a wordless Advent homily.

For children who cry, ?Leave the light on,? as you exit their bedrooms, it is good news indeed that the Light is, and is with us.

If there?s room, keep the wreath on the table so that prayers can begin right after supper. This helps ensure there will be a supper and not merely the consumption of comestibles.

One of the saddest things I see preparing parents and their children for first Communion is children who are being asked to come to a table, set for a great feast, when they have no experience of the rituals of dining at table. Having a succession of warm, greasy paper bags thrust at you through the car window is a form of food distribution, but it?s not dining.

?Dining? is not code for ?raise a suckling pig and slaughter it in the bathtub,? or any of the lifestyles shows and magazines that suggest cooking is best left to the professionals. I raised my children on the *Mennonite More-With-Less Cookbook*, in which the editors have marked a happy number of the recipes with the welcome initials TS, for time-saver. And though I will always substitute pinto beans for the kidney beans called for in the Monterey Beans and Cheese, I can attest that it is fast and cheap and good.

Dining, however plain, is about more than eating. There?s the planning and the shopping and the cooking and the cleaning. Someone has to set the table. People gather. There are wonderful smells. They tell stories. They eat from common platters and bowls. That means each has to judge, ?Have I taken too much? Is there enough left for others?? It also means learning to tolerate a general menu, one not tailored -- right down to ketchup, but no mustard, and onions only if they are grilled -- to you. And that?s a good thing if we are asking children to live in the community that is the church, in the community that is the world.

We eat facing one another. We hear one another, and maybe, at the table evening after evening, we will learn to listen. There is sense of starting and finishing together, with nobody getting dessert first.

After the meal, there?s the washing and sweeping and putting away. It goes faster and easier if everybody helps. When we?re done with an actual meal, we have some sense of what it costs to set a table and welcome those who are hard to love, what it costs to feed the hungry and clean up the mess they leave behind. It?s a pretty fair look, I think, into the life of the One who sets the table and provides the food and welcomes us to the table of the Lord. And it?s the best preparation and formation I know for coming, hands open and empty, to the table where we will be fed.

Rituals are not tasteful accompaniments to human life. They are the very stuff of human life: gathering, singing, eating, telling stories, lighting candles in the darkness, touching and comforting one another, marking the passage of seasons, grieving and rejoicing together.

We may be captives awaiting ransom from our exile, but ritual allows us to wait in communion, with God, and with one another.

[Melissa Nussbaum is an *NCR* columnist who lives in Colorado Springs, Colo.]

Source URL (retrieved on *06/01/2015 - 20:32*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/my-table-spread/how-we-see-and-know-daily-holiness