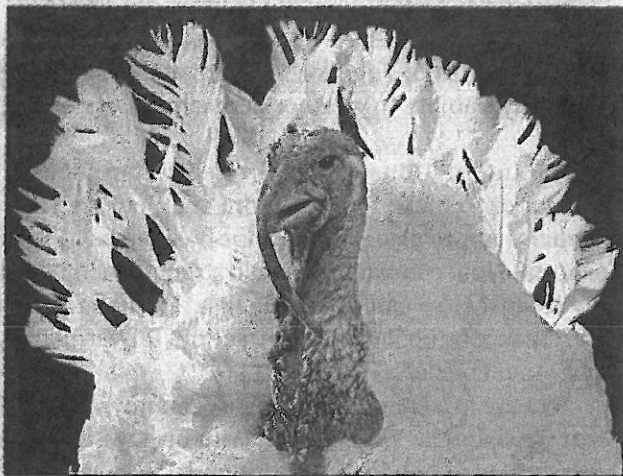


ANTICIPATING THANKSGIVING



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stars the turkey was granted the Thanksgiving season pardon by President George W. Bush in 2003.

How to handle political discussions at the dinner table

After Thanksgiving dinner, an out-of-town relative drops a political discussion bomb. Before we know it, adrenaline floods the room.

After the 2016 presidential election, one survey found that about one-sixth of adults in the United States lost a relationship with a close friend or family member due to political conflict.



Everett L. Worthington Jr.

Color me pessimistic, but it seems that things might have become more polarized since then. Here are 10 practical guidelines to avoid alienating relatives during the holidays.

Ahead of the day:

Pre-emptive forgiveness. Perhaps your experience with Uncle Huck has shown that he just can't control inflicting extreme opinions on everyone. Or Grandma seems very feisty in the past couple of years. What can you do? Forgive

ahead of time. This involves three experiences.

First, empathy. Tell yourself, I might get triggered. It's happened in the past. I don't want to lose this close relationship. My family member doesn't either. Try to empathize with where she (he) is coming from.

Second, altruism. Give your grandma the benefit of the doubt — especially if you don't believe she deserves it. That is altruism, an unmerited gift.

Third, be grateful. Find several things you can be thankful for in this family member. Yes, it might be a stretch in Uncle Huck's case, but it is Thanksgiving after all.

Plan positive topics.

Think about what you can discuss that won't provoke arguments.

Plan how to diffuse tense situations. Design ways to cope with any provocation.

It is hard to cope when we are surprised with a provocation. Plan your response before you need it.

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Realize it might not be fair. You seem to be exerting all the effort to avoid toxic arguments. It's because you care. With family and friends, let care outweigh fair.

Understand that reactions are complex. Your relatives respond to you out of their human nature, morals, beliefs and the community they live in. They are subject to different pressures than you are. It isn't likely that they will arrive at the same positions you hold.

If you start to get wound up:

Realize that beliefs rarely cause the other person's emotional reactions when disagreements break out. It's a threat to their ego, values or existential belief system or perhaps more seriously, the threat of loss of love. People often are not rational when they are threatened — and they don't even know they are feeling threatened.

Look at the other side of the threat. We might believe we are merely making logical arguments. We aren't just being rational. We are probably threatening our relative with damage to their ego, values, beliefs and with loss of love.

Reduce the threat. Remember to love the family member. Practically, this means treat the person as someone of value. Don't devalue the person by name-calling. Affirm to yourself that well-meaning people can have different beliefs and values. Say to yourself, "I cannot win this argument. Even if I 'win,' I lose the relationship." Ask yourself: "Am I being a peacemaker, or am I pushing the relative to extremes?"

If an argument occurs:

Try to analyze what is going on. In a heated discussion, it's hard to step back and analyze. But it will help. Ask yourself, Is the other person getting personal with insults? Is the other person unable to let go of a topic even if everyone else wants to drop it?

Cope with the hurts. There are many ways to deal with felt injustices. You can forbear — just let it slide for the sake of the group. You can turn the matter over to God. You can reason that life is too short, and just accept that, "Stuff happens. I'm moving on."

Forgive. There are two types of forgiveness. Decisional forgiveness is making a decision to treat the person as a valued and valuable person, even if we don't feel like it at the moment. The second is emotional forgiveness, which is reducing negative emotions by empathizing with, feeling compassionate toward or loving the other. Forgiveness doesn't mean you knuckle under. Rather, it keeps a hurt at Thanksgiving from holding over to other holidays.

Not every hot discussion can, or should, be avoided. It is through discussion that political progress takes place. But we can realize that not every offered point of contention needs to be solved at the Thanksgiving table. We can be thankful for that.

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