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Just Thinking, 12/23/02:

From Raking the Leaves to Caroling

by Justin Katz

This holiday season, loosely defined as the last three months of the year, has been a sort of foreshadowing of those to come. Our daughter hasn't been old enough to appreciate seasonal activities, but we vaguely feel as if we should be pursuing them, building traditions. This year, we, as new parents, got away with doing no more than brainstorming. Next year, we'll have to begin testing activities to discern whether they're worthy of annual devotions of time and money.

As the air begins to pass the chill along from the north and the leaves begin to fall, there will be apple picking and strolls through the countryside, where nobody will mind if we toss the cores into the bushes. Before bed, we'll gather together and read of Johnny Appleseed or Rip van Winkle. When Halloween draws near, we will return to the farm for pumpkins and perhaps a hayride. Then, we'll head "into town" for a visit to a haunted Newport mansion, surely leaving bits of hay on the marble floors. At home, we'll carve the pumpkins and decorate the house and prepare costumes and croak to each other, "Nevermore." The goose bumps will smooth, however, when we gather in the pews to recall the saints who've left paths by which we might find our way through the dark forest of life.

In the following weeks, we'll lose ourselves in cornfield mazes and then rake our yard, making crinkling earth-tone beds on which to rest. Probably, only I will rest and will find myself

covered by cascades of leaves and giggles. The decorations will need changing, and hands-on craft shops will add to our collection pottery and baskets of our own making. Those evenings, throughout the years, we'll read of choosing paths and mending fences, or perhaps we'll sing folk songs for each other, gathered around the piano. As the children age, they can choose – or write – poems to read or songs to sing. However we do it, by Thanksgiving we will have a sense of the past for which we are meant to be thankful.

The month leading up to Christmas will be the most full. The shopping during that stretch of the season is much more involved, and the decorations involve ladders and wires. Rather than picking apples or lifting pumpkins, we'll stroll among trees until we find that *one* – not too short, but not so tall that it will touch the ceiling; not sparse of branches or needles, but not wider than the space between the window and the couch. And green, like the paint on the homemade decorations is green. With the tree strapped to the roof of the car, we'll go to a special restaurant (which we've yet to find) and start our meals with hot apple cider, ending them with eggnog.

Still, there is more. A nativity scene must be set up, and an advent calendar diligently followed (revealing one chocolate per day, or better yet, we'll find a wooden one with doors behind which we can place personalized surprises each year). One evening must include a trip to the monastery to look at the statues and the lights and to light a votive candle and remember those whom we wish not to forget. Then we must find a Santa on whose lap the children might sit and return home to wrap presents and send out cards and watch classic Christmas movies and cartoons.

After church on Christmas Eve, we'll go caroling – personally reinvigorating the practice if need be, at least in the neighborhood. Then we'll return home to hot cocoa and bundle the children up in pajamas and blankets. We'll read "The Night Before Christmas," and if the wind is strong enough, it will rattle something in the chimney, and the children will gasp, with eyes

sparkling, and look toward the ceiling. My wife and I will rush them off to bed and relax on the couch, waiting for St. Nick.

These are the things with which I want to fill my children's lives – my life. They fall in among many other activities of the sort that I know enrich our years and increase spiritual wellbeing. Most important is experiencing the growth and progress of a family, all the lessons and reading and play as well as the productions and concerts and matches. But we also need time for ourselves. For me, an example would be that I yearn to practice piano, and I feel as if I am letting slip an irrecoverable piece of my personality. Sometimes time for one's self is not much more than an opportunity to shift perspective, such as my desire to take up kayaking to explore my island from the water. In a canoe, it could be time spent romantically. Such time well spent offers a window into the personal significance of God's gift.

But how do these things work into a schedule? I could put them on my To Do list among the tasks that I must perform for pay and those that I pursue in the hopes that they one day will pay more, and more fulfillingly. Scripting the rich moments of life, however, puts a person at risk of coming to see them as simply more chores to be accomplished. On the other hand, they require time and preparation that come at the expense of work.

Progress in careers would certainly increase our related stores of time and money. Such an important part of life as experiencing one's children, however, is something for which a parent will either make time or not. I intend to make time. Still, some other piece of my day will have to be sacrificed in some degree, and there is no reason to expect a significant shift by the time I incorporate tradition building. Perhaps some fat may be trimmed from my hours, but they are pretty lean as it is.

I didn't even rake the leaves this year.