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# Culture Change in Practice

## A Christmas Parable

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Posted by Steph Kilen at 3:46 PM



**"Culture Change in Practice" is our own weblog where people can become involved in a conversation about Culture Change as it is practiced by professionals in real nursing homes. Feel free to join the conversation, or post a comment about something you have learned on your journey.**

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I love a good story, don't you? There are certainly a lot of them this time of year, from the kid with the BB gun, to the old miser's change of heart, to the original Christmas story. At Action Pact, we often talk about the power of the story because, as we know from the Christmas stories, we learn life's lessons best when they can be seen practically applied. I particularly like a parable or a story that carries the message in an analogy. The mind must not only process the words and follow the plot, but also pick out the truths that speak not only to the characters of the story, but also to those in many different situations. The involvement the reader or listener has in this process leads to greater understanding.

So, I have a little story for you - a parable, if you will, about change and the importance of relationships. It's the story of a family's quest for a meaningful Christmas to call their own.

Ever since the kids were little the Johnson family had been celebrating Christmas the same way. On Christmas Eve, Helen makes a big roast for dinner and then everybody goes to the midnight service at church together. Christmas morning Donald makes pancakes for everybody and then they open presents. In the afternoon, they join Helen's siblings and parents at her brother's house for cookies and eggnog. This is the way they have always done it but Helen has noticed the last several years have

had a little more stress than cheer and when it was all over instead of memorable moments she has only images of her loved ones taking off and putting on their coats and indigestion.

Helen and Donald's children, Kate, Ben and Allison, are married and Kate and Ben have children of their own. While Helen and Donald couldn't be happier with their children's choices of spouses, it has made celebrating Christmas a little more tricky. Their children must of course celebrate also with their in-laws and they are developing new Christmas traditions of their own. So, last year's celebrating looked a little like this:

Food was eaten. Presents were given and received. People gathered. But it was all done for the sake of doing it not in the spirit of caring and love and Christmas. There was a whole lot of driving back and forth and leaving early and coming late to accommodate all obligations. Kate and Allison only saw each other as one was leaving her parents' house and one was just arriving. The grandkids were cranky and tired after staying up for church. At one point, Timmy turned to his mother, Kate, and said, "Ugh ,Mom, is Christmas almost over? I'm tired." And that was when Helen knew it was time for a change.

This year, in early November she invited Kate, Allison and Ben's wife, Elizabeth, for a nice lady's brunch at a local restaurant. She sent pretty, handwritten

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## Christmas Parable, *continued*



invitations that said, “Bring your calendars and thinking caps.” When they had all arrived and the coffee had been poured, Helen got down to business. “Did you notice that Christmas last year seemed more like a chore than a celebration?” she asked. The other three women giggled a little and nodded. “We didn’t want to say anything, Mom, but you’re right.”

“Well,” Helen said, “I think we need to fix that. We’re bright women! Between the four of us I’m sure we can come up with something.” They quickly agreed that what they needed was to slow down a little to have time to savor the moments and that they needed a change in schedule which would include seeing which traditions were most important and cherished by all and which they could let go.

At first it was hard looking so closely at and questioning these long-held traditions. But when Kate finally confessed that at Uncle Earl’s she always gave her eggnog to a houseplant and the other three ladies confessed to doing the same thing, they knew they could be really honest about this because the bottom line was they were committed to having a better holiday.

They decided what was most important to them was to spend some quality time with each other and with their individual families, even if it meant they would not all be together for the full two days. It always sort of bugged Helen that she would work all day to make the big

Christmas Eve meal and then they would rush out right when everybody was finished eating to go to church. The next morning she had to get up early to clean up the mess in time for pancakes. Another topic that came up was how quickly they rushed through opening presents because there were so many and they had to get to Uncle Earl’s. And on the topic of Uncle Earl’s gathering, it was obvious that all involved, including aunts, uncles, cousins and grandma and grandpa were exhausted by this point in the holiday and everybody was waiting for the one brave soul to decide it is time to leave so that everyone could join in. It’s nice to see each other, but frankly, there are limits to eating, drinking and being merry.

So, this is what the women of the Johnson family came up with:

They would all gather at Kate’s house Christmas Eve and everybody would get there when they could. Instead of driving back and forth to Helen and Donald’s they would all spend the night at Kate’s who had plenty of “room at the Inn.” At Thanksgiving everybody, including the children, would draw names and they each would buy pajamas for the person whose name they drew. This would be the extent of gifts for the adults as they all agreed they had enough stuff. They would order pizza (of course tipping the delivery guy well) and have snacks on paper plates. Everyone would put on their new pajamas and they would play games, watch a Christmas movie and just hang out

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## Christmas Parable, *continued*



together. The next morning the children would open presents (Santa knew they were all at Kate's) and then, yes, they would have Donald's pancakes, a tradition they decided they could not live without. Finally, they would go to church where they could be quiet and reflect on the "true meaning of Christmas."

Since Kate and John celebrated Christmas with his family the next weekend in Florida, they and Helen and Donald would be together all the way through. Ben and Elizabeth would join in Christmas Eve through breakfast and then go to church and have Christmas dinner with her family and Allison and Kent would show up Christmas morning and stay along through church having spent Christmas Eve with his family. Helen would talk to her family and suggest a get together later in January near her mother's birthday so that they all could appreciate spending time together more and hopefully the stores would be out of eggnog by then.

Relieved and excited by their decisions they chatted about other things as they finished their brunch. They enjoyed their little female bonding so much that they decided this brunch would also become a new tradition.

### QUESTIONS:

*Why did Helen invite the women to help her problem solve?*

*What does the story tell us about communication?*

*What was most important about their traditions?*

*What about the "old way" was causing problems?*

*What did the women learn from their discussion?*

*How do you think their plan worked out?*

*How can we apply the lessons of this parable here?*

