In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and the other villagers of Anatevka sing about traditions at a place and time when every person's role in life was dictated by tradition. In Tevye's world, as in ours, traditions served families as a source of strength; they gave families a sense of identity and of faith. Now when so much is changing, traditions still give family members strength and stability, as well as a sense of certainty in family love when life may seem full of uncertainty.

BY LLOYD D. NEWELL
"Traditions give you a sense of family and they give you a sense of belonging to a group of people, not being alone in the world," a thoughtful mother explained.

While researchers have studied the effects of family traditions on family life for many years, this article describes the results of a recent qualitative study of 28 families. During 1998-99, I conducted interviews with one-, two-, and three-generation families about their experiences with tradition in family life. The families were interviewed in their homes in Chicago, Salt Lake City, and Baton Rouge. Family members were African-American, white, Hispanic, Cajun, Israeli, and Pakistani. They came from many faiths—Roman Catholicism, Islam, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Judaism, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. The real-life experiences of these families confirmed in a multidimensional way what scientists had already documented in other, more quantitative studies and shed new light on the interplay of faith and tradition.

Family traditions and rituals are powerful, significant aspects of family life. Each in their own way, families from the different geographic locations, religions, and ethnic traditions represented in this research, said something similar to what one mother put so well: "Traditions are the cement that keeps the family together . . . and help you withstand the storms that come."

**Traditions Are A Source of Strength**

The most frequent comment about traditions, from every family interviewed, was that they strengthen and sustain the family. In a related study, researchers studying North Dakota and Nebraska families also found the

*While scholars tend to use the word rituals in their work, the families in this study almost exclusively used the word traditions to describe the same activities, so we will use the term most common to families.

strongest families have the highest frequency of family rituals, or traditions. Families in the current study had independently discovered what the scholars had learned: when they described how eating dinner together, praying together, observing holidays, and holding family celebrations for birthdays, anniversaries, and accomplishments bring closeness and unity to the family.

Even—and sometimes especially—under difficult circumstances, traditions can have a positive effect. Family members who were interviewed for this study spoke of their traditions as an anchor in hard times, as another mother explained: "At the time of a huge event, like a death, or a birth, traditions can carry you through. When your body goes on autopilot, as it does when there's a death or any other tragedy, the traditions that you have are just like a wonderful cocoon that you feel wrapped up in and comforted by. . . Traditions help you know that life goes on."

Similarly, another study found that families of alcoholics are less likely to transmit alcoholism to the next generation if they maintain the family dinner-time ritual and do not allow a parent's alcoholism to interfere with this time together. In the same way, diabetic children whose families maintained regular routines and had regular traditions in which they participated had fewer behavioral problems than diabetic children who lacked those benefits.

The ability of traditions to bring peace to the family was emphasized by another mother, who spoke of their Jewish Sabbath, "We feel very close whenever we do these things because it makes me feel like we've brought a moment of peace, a moment of difference into our busy weekly, daily lives. I think that helps us weave our lives together."

Families also reported that traditions helped them feel safe and secure, as a mother pointed out: "They give us something that we can rely on, that we know. Feelings that everybody goes through during difficult periods in our lives cause confusion or feelings of isolation, but they always know, they [the children] can act like they don't like them, but deep inside they may be comforted by knowing that we're doing it the same as we always did, and we're always here doing the ritual and we're going to do it together."

**Traditions Are A Source of Identity**

"We're always here and we're going to do it together. "This is what our family does"—traditions give families and family members a sense of identity as values are shared and a sense of belonging is established. This mother continued: "Without these rituals, we would not be Jewish. I can tell you that right now. . . They connect me essentially; they connect me to people around me, my family, my community, my beliefs. . . . Even though we are scattered all over the world, I can go anywhere and observe Sabbath and it will be pretty much the same. . . Our rituals give us an identity. They give us a sense of who we are and how we're different from other people."

Family scientists seem to agree that traditions help give families and family members a sense of identity. The continuity of this process was a source of fulfillment to a father who said: "One of the things that gives me a lot of joy is to hear [my children] reminisce and think back to things we've done as a
family and the memories they have. Those memories are a part of what makes them who they are and what will shape them for the future and for their family."

The sense of family identity and unity fostered by traditions has been found by other researchers, as well: "Rituals also protect [family] members against a sense of loneliness and uncertainty in daily living encountered outside the home . . . ." A study of the development of a "Family Ritual Questionnaire" found that the highest level of family cohesion, or sense of togetherness, was related to nothing more complicated than family dinnertime—sitting down to a meal together.

Traditions also help to preserve the family's "story." Families are eager to share their memories and experiences; the process of telling their stories seems to bring them together as they laugh and remember. Sharing the story of a child's birth or ever a trip to the emergency room reinforces the sense of family, even though some family stories are more sober than others.

The traditions that create individual and family identity need not have cosmic scope. One woman's happiest childhood memory was her annual trip with her father to the New Orleans Jazz Festival. She and her husband, their children, and her mother were going back for the first time since her father's death soon after the interview. "I'll probably cry more . . . . But that's okay," the 67-year-old widowed grandmother said. "For years we sat through the rain and the cold and the heat and the everything; oh but it was fun. It was really fun." The return to the beloved tradition makes a memory for a new generation and solidifies the family's identity.

Similarly, another family has invited family and friends over for ice cream every Sunday evening for many years. The mother says this tradition gives the family "that belonging feeling, which is part of being safe and secure." In addition to connecting themselves to the larger community of friends and family (whether the actual number in attendance is five or twenty-five), this family has created an identity for itself and others as a hospitable family that welcomes others into the immediate family circle for conversation and fun. It's no surprise that the children in the family intend to continue the "Sunday evening ice cream" tradition when they establish homes of their own. Other families relate: "Traditions are a perpetuation of what we believe to be good and wholesome and worthwhile and necessary. It's keeping a good thing going." The idea of "keeping a good thing going" across the generations has been supported by experts who study family life and family traditions.

Something that seems insignificant or begins as a simple routine can become an intergenerational tradition,
TRADITIONS ALLOW FAMILIES TO EXAMINE THEMSELVES AND THEIR CUSTOMS

A father emphasized the teaching function of traditions, saying: "Traditions are times when we can learn more about life, what I can improve on. It's not just how the kids can improve, but how I as a parent can improve. . . . I see the things that I am doing. My behavior is seen in my children's behavior; all of a sudden I can see it because of our traditions and interactions." Perhaps the repetitive nature of some traditions allows family members to chart and evaluate their behavior over time.

Traditions surrounding important holidays or rare but important occasions, such as weddings and funerals, are especially memorable and, perhaps, especially difficult to change, even when circumstances or common sense requires change. Generations of children and teenagers have experienced heart-aches when, instead of going "Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house," Grandma's health, Grandma's new apartment, or a cross-country move requires Grandma to come to their house—or perhaps Thanksgiving happens without Grandmother or Grandfather at all. Similarly, many parents have been forced to adjust their expectations when a child decides to forego college in pursuit of some other dream or doesn't want to enter the family business. These occasions may give family members the chance to examine themselves and their relationships as well as evaluate a possible need for change.

For example, a mother whose 12-year-old son decided he's an atheist hopes that as he "goes through the various stages of life, even though he doesn't believe right now, hopefully, as he grows, if he decides he does believe, he'll have rituals to come back to. But if we never expose him to these rituals now, whether he believes or not, he won't feel a sense of connection to them as he grows older." She also insists that her sons become b'ni mitzvah. "That's something they don't have a choice in. They are too young to make that decision, so we're making it. . . . That's one ritual that's really important to us." There are times when family traditions must continue for the sake of the family, even—or especially—for the sake of family members who refuse to participate.

TRADITIONS ARE A SOURCE OF FAITH AND MEANING

In nearly every interview, a connection between faith and traditions became apparent. Scholars have noticed the sacred or "transcendent" meaning of family rituals and traditions. Interviewed families saw their faith as an important element in why they had traditions, how they structured them, or what they expected to derive from keeping most traditions.

An insightful mother said: "I think my life would be empty without rituals and traditions . . . . they're very enriching for the soul . . . . I want my grandchildren to have these values . . . . [your] soul needs to be filled up, and in your rituals I think you fill the soul."

Traditions may be a reflection of the family's faith and an integral part of a religious holiday or service. Many Christian families have traditions concerning the Nativity scene, the Christmas tree, and special church services at Christmas and Easter. Hanukkah and Passover include ancient traditions cherished along with more modern family traditions in Jewish families. Islamic families may have special family funds and traditions concerning the need for family members to participate in the hajj, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca. Buddhist families honor the

TOP 15 FAMILY TRADITIONS

As reported by 84 families and their college-age son or daughter enrolled in introductory marriage and family courses at Utah State University, From Jay D. Schvaneveldt and Thomas R. Lee, "The Emergence and Practice of Ritual in the American Family," Family Perspective 17(3) (1983): 137-143, 139.

1. CHRISTMAS
2. BIRTHDAYS
3. FAMILY VACATION
4. EASTER
5. SUNDAY DINNER
6. VISITS TO RELATIVES
7. FIXED TIME FOR SUPPER
8. THANKSGIVING
9. FAMILY REUNIONS
10. FAMILY PRAYER
11. HOUSECLEANING ROUTINES
12. NEW YEAR'S DAY
13. NEW YEAR'S EVE
14. FATHER COOKING DINNER
15. DINNER-TABLE SEATING
dead through the beautiful rituals of Obon.

However, some family traditions that create memories and strengthen families are not connected to religious observances. One family regularly helps at a local soup kitchen, together with any of the children's friends who are willing to join in. The family's belief that its members have an obligation to help those less fortunate and that friends are welcome to participate could not be better conveyed.

Another family has a 20-year tradition of gathering every spring to list each person's favorite things—favorite book, favorite song, favorite food, etc. The lists are carefully preserved and the now-college-age children look forward to each year's creation of new lists and the review of lists from previous years. Their mother says, "This simple activity has a lot of meaning for our family. . . . It gives us an insight into each other, a way to get to know each family member better, as well as ourselves. . . . This has done more than anything else to build unity and family ties." The lists began as an activity for young children and have become a cherished springtime tradition for a family that emphasizes the importance of knowing oneself and other family members.

This research provided further evidence that family traditions are beneficial as they give families strength, identity, and generational continuity. Traditions strengthen and support families and strong families tend to create more traditions. These traditions allow the family to evaluate itself and make necessary adjustments, while faith and values energize the process and give traditions additional meaning. Healthy traditions create a winning situation for families—a situation worth planning for and well worth implementing. They bring the rewards of love and closeness to family members across the genera-

Notes
TAKE INVENTORY OF YOUR FAMILY

TRADITIONS

Some families think they have too many or enough traditions and some wish they had more. Because traditions can play such an important part in family life, a couple (engaged or married) or family may want to take inventory of family traditions and perhaps discuss new traditions that would enrich their lives together. The following list of questions will help you get started. It is adapted from William J. Doherty, *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties*, chapter 12.* (Doherty refers to traditions as “rituals.”)

Evaluating Your Family Rituals

Directions

Put a plus (+) in the left column if you think this ritual is already strong in your family and does not need much improvement.

Put a zero (0) if you think this ritual could use some improvement.

Put a minus (−) if you think this ritual could use a lot of improvement.

Write “no” if you think this ritual is not important or you don’t want to work on it.

___1. We have meals together regularly.
___2. Our mealtimes are full of good feeling and good conversation.
___3. We often share enjoyable family activities at home.
___4. We often share enjoyable family activities away from home.
___5. We have rich holiday rituals.
___6. We share enjoyable family vacations.
___7. We engage in regular positive contact with our relatives.
___8. We celebrate birthdays well.
___9. We have satisfying ways to acknowledge Mother’s Day.
___10. We have satisfying ways to acknowledge Father’s Day.
___11. (For families with young children) We have satisfying bedtime rituals.
___12. (For couples) We regularly find time alone to talk.
___13. (For couples) We use bedtime as a way to connect at the end of the day.
___14. (For couples) We go out alone together on a regular basis.
___15. (For couples) We celebrate anniversaries in a way that is meaningful to both of us.
___16. We regularly see family friends.
___17. We are actively involved in a church/synagogue/mosque, or a similar community concerned with beliefs, ethics, and values.
___18. We are involved in neighborhood activities.
___19. We participate in recreational or educational groups and activities (for example, athletic programs, book clubs, support groups).
___20. We are involved in activities to better our community.
___21. (For parents) We talk to our children about social and community concerns.
___22. (For parents) We are active in our children’s school.

For each ritual you would like to improve, ask yourself these follow-up questions:

1. Is a ritual missing where you’d like one to be?
2. What is the current ritual lacking?
3. Is there too much responsibility placed on one family member?
4. Are family members achieving a balance between individual time and family time?
5. Is an underlying family problem hurting the ritual?

Guidelines for Talking to Family Members About Changing Rituals

1. Choose a peaceful moment for the discussion.
2. Explain that you would like to discuss a specific family ritual, that you have been thinking about this family ritual and want to hear their thoughts as well.
3. Express your feelings and needs related to the ritual.
4. Invite the others to share their own feelings, needs, and thoughts about the ritual.
5. Offer your ideas tentatively, rather than definitively.
6. Negotiate a trial run of a new or modified ritual that balances everyone’s needs.
7. Agree to follow up to determine how everyone likes the new or modified ritual.

As couples and families think of ways to enhance family unity, strength, security, and identity, their traditions can become richer and more satisfying as they become a reliable part of family life. A couple can choose from the best traditions in their families of origin and choose new traditions to build together and with their children.  