
Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute - December 2009



Thoughts from Sally St. George

Tradition and Social Construction

I had firmly resolved not to make Christmas cookies this year. My reasoning was that I could save some time and would not have the temptation to snack on sugary treats or entice others to engage in the intake of extra calories, and would not have the expense of shipping food from Canada to the US. I was strong in my resolve until I heard one of my "old" supervisees telling one of my "new" supervisees the following: "You are really lucky. Make sure to never miss December consultations because Sally brings the best plate of Christmas cookies. In fact, would you skim off the top layer of cookies and make me a smaller plate before anyone else has a chance to sample them? Make sure to get extra of the chocolate balls-she usually puts green frosting on them."

Now I was in a pickle. I was both complimented and felt that I should follow through with a tradition I had started. So I made cookies. In the middle of preparing a batch that required frosting and decorating with colored sugar, my youngest daughter called. I told her what I was doing and recounted the story I have often told her about what a neat cookie decorator she was and that I missed her assistance. I said, "I could really use your help right now, because I can count on you to keep the sugar on the cookies and in the trays and not shake it over the entire kitchen like your sister used to do." My daughter purred like a kitten and reminisced about that and other traditions of preparing delicacies in the kitchen even though she currently lives on another continent.

It seems to me that my efforts to unilaterally change the Christmas cookie baking tradition were a miserable failure. Not that I find it surprising; I believe that we are relational beings who need to interact and have a voice in those changes that affect us.

In a way, I am thankful for the "failure." The memories and stories are so precious and tied to the specialness of our relationships-they connect us in ways that hold the past, help us count on the present, and look into the future. I realize that traditions have the potential to become burdensome, lose their meaning, or have a sense of monotonous repetition to them; they can also introduce freshness (my cookies always look and taste slightly different even though they retain their same name year after year), flexibility (I tried making Nanaimo bars, a Canadian favourite), connectedness (feelings of being special because cookies are given or received), and hope (that there are some good things to look forward to).

Maybe next year we will create together a new tradition called, "Remember the Year You Did NOT Bake Christmas Cookies so the Kids and Grandkids Did all the Baking and Learned the Favourite Recipes?"

Lucky for us all that traditions can be valued in a world of change.