

Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

First Conflict

It was our first crisis. The year was 1973. Nancy and I had been married for about ten days. I went into the bathroom of our apartment. It was there that I discovered the toilet paper roll. Nancy had hung it wrong. You see, when my mother placed the toilet paper on the roller, she always had the paper coming down the side of the roll that the wall was on. That meant that taking the paper was a one-hand job. You could reach the toilet paper, grab it, and as you rotated the bottom of your hand towards you, the paper tore off.

But Nancy had hung the roll so that the paper came down on the side away from the wall. I tried taking the paper with one hand, but alas, I simply unrolled far more paper than I needed. This created an additional, exasperating problem. When I then re-rolled the toilet paper, the roll was no longer even. It looked tacky. What if guests were to come to our home and see the sloppy roll of toilet paper? Horrors!

I, of course, had a solution. Nancy could simply place the roll on the roller the correct way—my mother's way. All would be well. Peace of mind would be restored. Domestic harmony, secure.

Which brings us to our first Christmas, our second crisis. This one was also related to the problem of in-laws. The crisis went like this. In *my* family, we always opened Christmas presents on Christmas Eve. It was utterly magical. We'd go to church, where we'd meet my grandparents. After church, our parents would head for home while our grandparents took us to see the Christmas lights. They would then drive us home, where we would discover that Yes, Santa had come to our home while we were at church! We kids would discover what Santa brought us, and we'd then open our Christmas presents.

Nancy's family did things differently. I was okay with that, as long as she didn't expect us to import her family's traditions into our marriage. Her family went to church on Christmas Eve, just like we did. (In fact, we went to the same church, though as children, Nancy and I weren't yet married. We had the patience to wait until we were nineteen to get engaged, and being the mature, intelligent people that we were, we waited a whole five months to get married.) As I said, like ours, Nancy's family went to church on Christmas Eve, but when they got home, they went to bed. They didn't open Christmas presents till Christmas morning! I could barely imagine such an illogical practice. I mean, how's a boy to fall asleep with all those presents left unopened?

This, of course, precipitated our second crisis. We were, after all, husband and wife. We both had in-laws, and we had to begin to learn to put our family traditions together. That is often easier said than done. However, this was one case when the blending of traditions worked. By the time our first Christmas rolled around, we had learned the art of compromise—something that was essential if we were successfully to bring together two family traditions. We sat down and discussed the matter as a couple. Not surprisingly, we also hit on a solution. As a matter of fact, the solution practically presented itself to us. At the time, we lived in the same city as our two families, so we

simply spent Christmas Eve with my family, and Christmas Day with hers. That enabled us to begin to live as a couple with two family traditions.

We still had one hurdle to clear if our crisis was to be resolved to our mutual satisfaction: When were Nancy and I going to open *our* presents—the ones that we gave to each other? This opened the opportunity for a serious implementation of the art of compromise. We learned to trade off. Owing to the headiness of its being our first Christmas as husband and wife, I was feeling exceptionally generous. So I agreed that on our first Christmas, Nancy and I would open our Christmas presents on Christmas *Day*, which was *her* family's way of doing things, and on our second Christmas, we'd open presents on Christmas *Eve*, which is *God's* way. This was before the phrase *win-win* had been coined, but I was pretty confident that we had hit on a solution.

So what took me back to the year 1973? One of our readers emailed me several questions, the first of which raised the issue of money and in-laws. In future issues, I plan to deal with these important matters. In the meantime, I share with you something of the first “crises” that Nancy and I faced because they foreshadowed inevitable conflicts that were the result of our coming from families that had different ways of doing things. Nancy and I had each grown to think of our own family's ways of doing things as the right way—the only way. Did we have a lot to learn!

In retrospect, I think that the most important thing we learned had less to do with trading off—doing things her way one year and my way the next—or even finding completely new ways. We found it helpful to ask, “What is *our* way?” We are husband and wife. We bring traditions, but we are still a new family. We are a couple. We're on the same team. What kinds of traditions will we develop and pass on to our children?