

Gratitude for family, friends, and traditions

As I sit down to write this column, I am preparing for the annual Holiday Open House at the president's residence and the tree lighting ceremony this evening. The month of December will fly by between semester-end traditions, including in-person commencement, service awards, and of course, the busy-ness and joy of the approaching holiday. I love all of it!

This season always evokes so many sweet memories for me, deep gratitude for all of the love that surrounds me, and the happiness stemming from the extra opportunities to focus on acts of kindness in the spirit of the season.

Sweet memories for me begin with traditional holiday food – especially the sweets. My mom and sister usually set a baking date. By the end of the day, they will have baked about 250 cookies. They are carefully packaged up for neighbors, co-workers, the mail carrier, and for the local shelter. There are still more cookies left to be eaten. My favorite are butterscotch oatmeal and frosted sugar cookies. My dad loves to frost the cutout cookies, and I appreciate his artwork.

My husband Bill's family makes the most delicious pound cakes. His grandfather was a Methodist bishop, and I think his grandmother baked a cake for the entire congregation. At her house there would be countless pound cakes, carefully wrapped, lining the stairs to the second floor. The love she poured into each pound cake was abundant. I miss her.

When I was young, my mom always organized a craft day. My brothers and sister and I would gather around the kitchen table and make a paper chain. That chain would be hung on the walls. Each year, the chain would be packed up in a big box, stored away, taken out the next year, and added to. It eventually covered every downstairs wall.

Each of us was also given a very large, personalized ornament. My mom hand-painted each one with our name on it – very significant for me as back in the day you could not buy anything with the name "Tisa" on it. It was such an honor to hang our special ornament.

We had a lot of Christmas rules. For example, you could never tell what you bought someone. One year, my sister and I decided to break that rule and told one another what we bought. Of course, mom discovered our secret and returned the gifts. Also, there was no peeking, and of course, there were consequences for peaking. On Christmas morning, we were not allowed to go downstairs until our parents were up and ready. I often slept on the stairs just to be a little closer to Santa's arrival and the magic of Christmas presents.

The art of Christmas gift wrapping is also a family tradition. The gift should never look like the actual gift. It is not uncommon for a small gift to be wrapped in several larger boxes. One year, my Dad jokingly put on his wish list "a whole lot of money" – so my mom went to the bank and got a lot of one-dollar bills, placed them in a box, and fluffed them up to create the illusion of bulk. Everyone got a good laugh out of that one.

As we grew older, new traditions emerged, like the tradition of the Christmas pickle ornament. On Christmas eve, after everyone has gone to bed, my parents place an ornament shaped like a pickle on one of the Christmas trees. (My mom usually has at least three trees.) The first to find the ornament is blessed with a year of good luck and an extra present.

I'll be honest, that tradition gets a bit competitive at our house. One year, I was even disqualified from the competition for getting up early and finding the pickle before everyone had a chance to look. I am still a bit bitter about the disqualification. Even though I did not get the pickle present that year, I believe I was still blessed with a year of good luck.

When my mom remarried, a new tradition came with my stepdad – a Christmas Eve open house. This tradition continues today with neighbors and friends gathering to eat, drink, and be merry.

One year, Bill and I were driving home from Kansas to Massachusetts, and we invited two international students, Oliver and Alice, to join us. At the open house, Alice ate her first deviled egg and loved it so much that she ate at least a dozen all by herself. Every year since, we think of Alice on Christmas Eve when my mom puts out the deviled eggs.

There are so many beautiful memories, music, smells, tastes, warm hugs, and deep friendships surrounding my childhood and adulthood during the Christmas holiday. It is a great time to lovingly remember those who are no longer with us and cherish those who are – new friends and old.

I asked some of our international students about their holiday traditions – whether they were celebrating Christmas, Eid, Ramadan, or another tradition, every student talked about gathering with family and friends. Friendship, family, and a sense of connection is so important to our well-being. So is a sense of generosity.

Poet Edwin Arlington Robinson said there are two kinds of gratitude: the sudden kind we feel for what we take and the larger kind we feel for what we give. I couldn't say it better. May your days ahead be filled with large gratitude.