

Christmas Experiences Make Memories

Myrna Lapres
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Each year, as I unpack ornaments and decorations, I am flooded with many memories of Christmases past. The ones that stand out the most are not the presents I received but the experiences that we had together as a family.

As a child, I remember the annual outing to get a live tree from a family friend in Oregon. He planted and sold trees on his land and he generously offered our family the opportunity to cut our own tree for free from one of the second-growths that sprouted up from the stump.

One year, my three siblings and I accompanied my dad on a damp Saturday

morning. As my dad tells the story, finding a suitable tree and sawing it down was not the biggest challenge. As we made our way back to the car along the muddy path, my brother Eric who was three, was having a difficult time keeping up. My dad, pulling the tree with one hand, grabbed my brother around the middle and lifted him up. Unfortunately, his boots remained stuck in the mud. For me, the highlight of the adventure was the retelling of the story to my mother back at home—how my dad had gotten all of us, the tree and even the boots safely back to the car.

Although we lived across the country from both sets of grandparents, we were able to spend some Christmases together with them. I remember the opportunities to spend time talking with them, the annual jigsaw puzzles, getting reacquainted with cousins, and eating the cookies and special Christmas treats.

One Christmas, we were in Plevna, Indiana with my paternal grandfather. My grandmother had been gone for several years and I am sure that it was a source of great happiness to have several of his children and their families spend the holidays together. On Christmas Eve, all of us cousins decided to bundle up and go caroling in the small town. I remember having a feeling of joy sharing carols with my grandfather's neighbors who we had never met before. My dad reminded me that this was special because it was the last Christmas that my grandfather alive. I am glad that I helped to make it memorable.

The Christmas with my own children that stands out is the one we spent in Puerto Rico. The trip was to celebrate my parents' sixty wedding anniversary which was in June. But December was when everyone was available. Renting a small villa with separate rooms for each family, we cooked meals in the outdoor kitchen and enjoyed the sounds of the tree frogs and tropical birds. We had our Christmas meal on a rooftop patio enjoying an incredible sunset. My Christmas wish that year was fulfilled as

my children had the opportunity to spend time with and reconnect to their grandparents as young adults.

What memories will you be creating this holiday season? It may not be possible to cut down a tree yourself. But what can you do to make selecting and decorating the tree a family tradition? Do you recognize and celebrate more than one holiday-- Hanukkah or Kwanzaa? How can you bring these traditions together to create new memories? There are a number of wonderful books to read with your children about the background of these holidays. Perhaps your family or grandparents live far away--who can your family invite to share a meal that also is missing family? The possibilities are endless but it takes intention to plan experiences that create new memories.

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