

## **The Family of Your Choice [FINAL Edition]**

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This Thanksgiving, I am driving a few hours with my husband and toddler to meet some friends in a cabin in the mountains. These are old friends, people with whom I have skinny-dipped in the ocean at midnight and marveled at the sparkling beads of phosphorous. We've weathered late-night disco dancing, the deaths of our parents, the births of children, the breakups of great love affairs, but we have never spent a holiday together. The night before, maybe, and the day after, but not the actual day.

I don't know entirely what to expect. We will probably baste the turkey and mash garlic into the potatoes and make jokes. Maybe we will dance. Someone will probably have an epiphany about life or the Democratic Party or the music of George Michael. But this I know for sure: Although we will not be with biological family, we will, in the holiday tradition, give thanks, happy to have such a close family of friends.

We discussed at length with each other how to break the news of our holiday plans to our families. It is a hard choice, one that more people seem to be facing as we age and the extended family begins to die off, as we move farther away from home to take jobs in cities such as Washington, New York, Seattle, and as the family unit, in some cases, crumbles under the weight of divorce and other trauma.

For some people, family will always reign supreme at holiday time, even when they can't be with relatives. But for others, it's just not practical to see family. It's not over the river and through the woods anymore, but to the airport and through the lines. And it costs about \$800.

For me, family has for the most part been a good thing, but something happens in the company of friends. Something free and wild and deeply personal. With friends, you are who you are at the moment, rather than who you were when you were 10. In a Zen-like manner, you can simply be.

Also, put simply, friends know you better.

"Friends tend to know more about the inner workings of your day-to-day life," says an old friend in South Carolina. "It makes more sense to toast with them at New Year's or Thanksgiving. It's not that I care for my family any less, but that I get something different from friends."

Or as another woman puts it, "With friends, if you want, you can eat the pumpkin pie first."

Sure, holidays are supposed to celebrate specific historical events: the birth of Christ, the birth of America. But more than that, holidays and celebrations help us mark time, allow us to see where we have been and where we are going. As we age, the years blur. Suddenly, we are 30, then 40, 50, 80, 90. Holidays shout, "stop." Literally, we take photos to freeze-frame the motion. I remember that year, we say. The year I became a mother. The year I quit the corporate world and began to teach. The year I dyed my hair magenta.

Extended family, unfortunately, is most familiar with the blur. If you are lucky, your perceptive uncle will ask, "How was your year?" You mention the new job, the new garage. But there is no time to explain, over the course of a turkey dinner, the day last August when you looked in the mirror and realized you don't know who you are. Friends know about that day. In fact, they probably met with you that night to talk about it over beers.

The distances between family members have, at least in part, fueled this change. America is a nation founded on mobility. Every year since 1947 nearly 20 percent of the population has moved. Friendships, at times, replace traditional family ties.

"It makes sense," says Jude Cassidy, a professor and psychologist at the University of Maryland who studies attachment theories. "If you don't see your parents or siblings as often as you would like, you would turn to friends."

According to Cassidy, we form attachments throughout our lives, beginning with the primary one between infant and mother. Later, as adults, our primary attachments are with our romantic partners, with siblings and parents following closely. For many of us, friends fulfill this role as well.

These attachments are no small matter. They are made with individuals, are emotionally charged, persist over time, are difficult to break and provide security in times of trouble.

Another factor is that the nation is graying, and several researchers have found that the role of friendships in our lives elevates with age.

"When we get older, friendships are very important because those people are our peers," says researcher Toni Antonucci, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan and program director of the Institute of Social Research in Ann Arbor.

"We have always seen an overlap in our language between friendship and family," says Rosemary Blieszner, a researcher at Virginia Tech who specializes in friendships among older people. "We say, 'My friend and I are so close we're just like sisters' or 'my sister is my best friend.' . . . We hear many people talk about their 'chosen family.' "

Researchers point out that friendships within older groups are often cemented because individuals have shared certain events. A bond exists between those who survived the Depression or World War II or Golden Gate Park.

Also, as we age, our spouses and relatives die, which leaves us with friends. And perhaps those of us in the first generation to live significantly longer seem weary of the extended-family holiday process.

When I was young, my entire extended family, mostly working class, lived in St. Louis, most of them within the same area of the city. Every Christmas, I saw grandmas, grandpas, aunts and uncles and second cousins, all within a space of a few days. I would be sent to the basement with an empty platter many, many times to get more spritz and sugarcoated wreaths from the freezer. I remember the magical chatter, the twinkling lights, my father making fun of Bing Crosby, the Miller High Life bottles.

My son will never experience that. The nearest relative is a seven-hour drive away. But perhaps he will view my friends as uncles and aunts--extended family members who might just let him eat the pumpkin pie first.

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