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## A fresh take on family traditions

### This year, spice up the your holiday with a few twists of inspiration

By [Heidi Stevens](#), Tribune Newspapers

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The beauty of holiday traditions lies in their consistency, familiarity and sure-as-the-setting-sun dependability.

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Their downfall? The doggone consistency, familiarity and sure-as-the-setting-sun dependability.

Where's the spontaneity? The spice? The joie de vivre that should go hand-in-hand with celebration?

"Many inherited traditions are beautiful and fine, but they become much more solid when we sit down and make a decision whether to keep them as is, ditch them or adapt them," says family counselor Kim John Payne, author of "Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure Kids" (Ballantine Books). "There's no harm in sitting down with your partner or friend or on your own and deciding why you're doing what you're doing and whether it's a good match with your family values."

Maybe you decide going into debt every fourth quarter is no longer a wise move. So fewer gifts. Maybe you decide holiday travel has become an exercise in misery. So you visit the relatives in January. Or maybe you leave the nuts and bolts in place and throw in a few new rituals that involve none of the usual holiday trappings.

"What if you went around asking people from different cultures, 'What's the most fun, most beloved practice your family does during holidays?'" suggests Claudia Kolker, author of the newly released "The Immigrant Advantage: What We Can Learn from Newcomers to America About Health, Happiness and Hope" (Free Press). "There are so many joyful celebrations and habits and delicious foods that make other cultures happy and enhance life."

Some ideas from Kolker:

Grape expectations: "One thing that I did growing up, that a lot of Mexicans and Spaniards do, is a New Year's tradition where you eat 12 grapes at the stroke of midnight," Kolker says. "You can even drop them in a glass of Champagne as a celebration of the happy, fizzy, fruitful upcoming months."

Las Posadas: "This is a heavily Mexican tradition of going house-to-house re-enacting Mary and Joseph searching for an inn. A whole group goes from place-to-place until someone lets you in and there's a party waiting."

Even if the particular Bible story doesn't fit with your belief system, Kolker says it's worth considering the ritual as inspiration.

"What's so meaningful is it involves community, it involves the neighborhood, it involves acting, caroling, participating, empathizing in a way that makes you feel deeply a part of something.

"There's something about taking part in ritual theater with your friends and neighbors — especially when you're singing, which science has linked to reaching a sense of transcendence."

Make an entrance: "A Vietnamese tradition I've adopted that's easy and makes intuitive sense is to make sure the first person who enters your door on New Year's Day will bring you good luck. Some people arrange for a very wealthy person to walk through their door first. Or you can send your kid out into the New Year's cold and ask them to come through the door. There's nothing more auspicious and hopeful than a kid."

Pack your bag: "Many Nicaraguans pack a maleta — a suitcase — and at the stroke of midnight bring it outside into the night air to celebrate. The purpose is to ensure you will travel and see new places in the new year."

The point is to make your traditions conscious, as opposed to rote. And in so doing, probably more enjoyable.

"It's very in keeping with the mindset of the people in my book," says Kolker, "which is the idea that trying something new, taking a little risk is what you want for yourself and your family to grow and prosper."

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## **Helping youngsters handle change**

If young kids are part of your celebration, a little pre-empting may be in order if you plan to change the usual holiday rituals, especially as they relate to mealtime.

"For any family gathering, you need to set the child up to be successful," says Betsy Brown Braun, author of "You're Not the Boss of Me: Brat-Proofing Your Four- to Twelve-Year-Old Child" (HarperCollins). "Kids are not often themselves when you change the familiar eating environment. Adding new and different people, eating at a different table, having new foods equals change."

-- "Prepare your child for what will happen. 'There will be lots of people eating all together. Lots of people will want to talk,' etc."

-- "Make sure the food on his plate is what he likes and is likely to eat. Don't pile it on."

-- "Craft your expectations to your own child. He's happiest sitting next to Grandpa; he needs to be on an end; he won't eat a bite ..."

-- "The trick is being sensitive to who your child is and how to make the evening successful for him."

— H.S.

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