

# Simply Thankful

MARIANNE PETERS

**F**all is mellowing into winter; the end of the harvest reminds me that it's time for Thanksgiving, and after that, the busy Christmas season. For working moms like me, adding the responsibilities and expectations of the holidays to an overstuffed life is like adding another full-time job. I tend to arrive at year's end exhausted and resentful.

I used to believe I was not organized or clever enough to make it all work. Then I began to suspect that it wasn't my inefficiency but rather the demanding voice of consumer culture that was fueling my anxieties. That voice tells me that my stuff isn't good enough, that I need better stuff. As I contemplate my Thanksgiving menu and mull over perfect Christmas gifts, the same voice tells me that I'm not doing enough—not decorating enough, not cooking enough, not buying enough presents, not making enough of a splash. The voice nags me, reminding me that it's my job to not only orchestrate family gatherings, but to direct sentimental reenactments of Norman Rockwell paintings, whether my family actually resembles those images or not. Enough already!

We don't have to be consumers. We can be sustainers. We preserve the planet when we celebrate simply and sustainably, conserving resources for the whole world and its future generations. And we preserve our souls too; we no longer fall into lockstep with market

forces that see us only as consumers sustained by stuff, not as human beings sustained by God.

Celebrating simply and sustainably, I've discovered, not only means less consumption and less waste, but also that I no longer feel exhausted and put-upon by the end of the celebration. When I host family gatherings, I'm learning to keep it simple, repressing the Martha in me that wants to fuss over every detail. I love to be hospitable, but I often forget that I'm invited to the party too. I can let some traditions slide. I can tone down the decorating. I can make the time special without emptying my wallet. Simple, sustainable celebrations make room for the things that really matter—honoring God's faithfulness, honoring our relationships with one another, spending good time together.

At Thanksgiving, for instance, I don't fill the house with arrangements of squash and cornstalks; I concentrate my efforts on making the table beautiful. As I do every day, I use cloth napkins, plates, glasses, and flatware, not disposables. (It's hard for me to celebrate when I know I'm going to end up with a trash can full of refuse.) Rather than plastic centerpieces or imported flower bouquets, I use natural elements such as Indian corn or tiny pumpkins as a centerpiece along with pillar candles. I've noticed that people tend to linger at the table if the candles are still burning. The natural elements are pleasing

to the eye and the spirit—they remind us of our connection to the land and to our shared history as pilgrims in a New World.

I make plenty of food, but I limit it to a few delicious dishes with seasonal, whole ingredients. That way I can sit a little longer at the table too, instead of being the Hostess with the Mostest. Sadly, for many of us, family ties are strained or broken; just spending an hour or two together is the best we can do. Rather than add to the strain by making (and managing) a multicourse meal, it's easier to concentrate on a few foods everyone likes.

Whole food purchased in season means less packaging and less waste, not to mention a lower price and a better taste. Whole foods don't have to be complicated; the first time I baked sweet potatoes in their own jackets and dug into their rich, sweet, orange flesh, I knew I would never buy them in a can again. This year, I'm buying a fresh turkey from a local source. Knowing that my meal is sustaining nearby farmers makes it even more satisfying.

Consumerism would like to remind me of my scarcity—real or imagined. By deliberately choosing to live with less—and calling that enough—I celebrate the abundance of God's gifts. I can be thankful because he has already given me everything I need. □

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.