



More than just a day

Thanksgiving at our house started the same way every year — with our dog, Checkers, sprinting laps throughout the house. We didn't need to look outside to know

Grandma had arrived.

Eventually, Checkers would come to a panting halt beside my grandmother in the living room. And there the dog would stay, still as a statue, for the rest of the night.

Our Thanksgivings evolved over time, but the pairing of Grandma and Checkers never changed.

Some families have Christmas or Hanukkah. We have Thanksgiving. For as long as I can remember, it's been the most meaningful holiday in my family. That's because so many of us have made a huge effort over the years to be together on Thanksgiving.

I was going to write about how the changes in our Thanksgiving celebrations reflect the growth in our lives. About how no matter how crazy a year's been, we always find something to be grateful for — even if it's just for being together.

But then I began reading papers, and this column took a slightly different turn.

They were my students' papers. For those of you who don't know, I teach part time at a local university. At the start of our last class, I asked my students to write about their most memorable Thanksgivings.

As I read their papers, I found myself saying one

word, aloud, over and over: "Wow."

I've never taught a group of students quite like this. They're a special group. They care deeply. They've got soul.

Many of my students' writings resonated with happiness, such as the man who proposed to his girlfriend on Thanksgiving (She said "Yes!"). Or the girl whose family once sang a gospel tune to her great aunt, who passed away at age 94.

But there was also the student who remembered a happy Thanksgiving from when he was 10 years old. It was the last time his family was all together.

Another recalled the Thanksgiving he was 6 or 7 years old. He enjoyed it, but his family hasn't celebrated Thanksgiving since.

I tried to imagine life without Thanksgiving — and Thanksgiving without family.

No Grandma winning at Pictionary (Did I mention she was blind?). No Mom cooking a feast. No Dad-led grace before dinner. No Aunt Dor sipping scotch. No kids running amuck. No cousins watching the sunrise together.

I couldn't imagine it. And when I tried to, it made me sad.

It shouldn't have.

Because every family has its own traditions. Even having no tradition can be a tradition.

I loved reading my students' essays. They told vastly different stories, yet they all had one thing in common — sincere gratitude.

Through their writing, my students showed me that no matter where you're from, how you celebrate it, or even if you celebrate it, Thanksgiving is more than just a day on the calendar; it's a sentiment.

So why should I wait until Thanksgiving to express my gratitude when I'm feeling so grateful now?

I shouldn't. To my family, coworkers, students and anyone who's listening, I have one thing to say: Thank you.

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