



Coming Together: The Power of Shared Rituals

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

My mother has a tradition of telling about when she was a little girl. She calls these tales Grandmother Stories. When she comes to visit, or when we go to see her, these stories are like a touchstone. They ground my children and help them feel comfortable even amongst travel and transition.

Recently my eight-year-old daughter and I uprooted ourselves for two weeks so I could spend time at a school in Tennessee. I wanted my daughter, my middle child, to have the opportunity to travel with me and have some one-on-one time with her grandparents.

On the first leg of our trip, I realized that we were in uncharted territory. In our family's previous travels, she and her sister had established a familiar routine, a routine that didn't include me. I expected her to want the window seat on the plane; she was used the aisle. I didn't have the same games or supply the same gum as her sister. Everything felt different for her without these familiar airline rituals.

The process of inserting ourselves into my parents' home also held its own set of challenges. Yet as I spent my days observing and teaching, my daughter latched onto a place of familiarity and comfort, asking for Grandmother Stories and creating collaborative, grandparent-friendly games. Each day I would come home and find that she had found a deeper place of connection.

My daughter and I also began to take evening walks; we used the time to share stories, get some exercise, and enjoy some fresh air. Regardless of the day, we could both look forward to our amble outdoors.

We feel comfortable and more connected when we know what to expect. The routines or rituals of our lives help define who we are, as individuals and as cohesive groups. Are we a family that

wants to spend more time outside? Do we want more fun in our lives? Who is willing to tend to particular household jobs?

After a few days of being in my parents' home, I noticed a change. One evening, as I cleared the dishes after dinner, I joked about how I had taken over my father's job of dish duty. He was trying to find space in the fridge for the leftovers and I realized that my daughter and I were no longer trying to find space in their house. Rather than being guests, we were sharing space and forming community.

Shared rituals provided us with a sense of belonging and connectedness. My daughter and I left our two-week stay in Tennessee feeling closer to each other and more connected to my parents. I listened in on Grandmother Stories and began to think of stories I could share about my own childhood. I wondered if we could keep up our evening walks despite the dark and cold of New England. On our flight back, my daughter asked to sit next to the window and we enjoyed our own routine of getting out gum and checking the in-flight magazine.

I cherished the fact that in a time of travel and transition, we were able to pay attention to our rituals, to share them, and even reshape them. During this holiday season, I hope we all can remember the power and promise of rituals, these shared experiences that define us and ultimately bring us closer together.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker, Director of Education and co-founder of The Montessori School of the Berkshires, is thankful each day as she watches children create a strong sense of self in the midst of community collaboration. Shared rituals play a key role in this process. www.berkshiresmontessori.org

