

# Traditions: People need sense of unity

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"What it does really is give us a sense of continuity. You're linked to anything that happened the year before and the year before and the year before."

Traditions also give people hope about the continuation of cultures, she said, because they create bonds of unity among individuals.

"When you have a family holiday that you know other people are celebrating - like Thanksgiving, like Christmas or Hanukkah - you feel a connection there with not only your own family, but the fact that all these others - that you know when you're sitting down for Christmas dinner that there are all those other families sitting down for Christmas dinner or Thanksgiving dinner, give or take an hour or two. So the notion that you're doing that in concert with a lot of other people is a very nice feeling."

How deeply a tradition affects people depends on the length of the history related to it, Sherman said. Thanksgiving is an interesting example of an ancient tradition that has youthful roots in how it is celebrated by Americans, she said.

Historically, the harvest has been celebrated annually by agricultural people across the world. This ancient tradition of thanksgiving is celebrated differently from location to location, and the manner in which it is celebrated depends on peo-

ple's diets.

The United States' current version of Thanksgiving is a younger holiday, originating only about 300 years ago. Like other harvest holidays, Thanksgiving gives certain prominence to particular foods, such as the Native American triad of corns, beans and squash. Its purpose is also the same as that of other harvest holidays, she said.

"In a sense it's a thanksgiving for the crops coming in," Sherman said. Despite its similar purpose, however, Thanksgiving in America is unique because of the way it has been standardized through marketing and media, Sherman said.

But this doesn't mean traditions are static, she said. All traditions change from year to year. Often people will maintain the basics of a family tradition but change one aspect of it to make it new, she said.

Both the continuation of the tradition and the minute changes to it are integral parts of the process and reflect the changing culture, she said.

"The reason that we recognize the tradition even though it's changing is because at the core there is something recognizable that doesn't change; or if it has a slight variation it may mutate into something else, but it is still recognizable," she said.

Traditional holidays can also take on greater popular meaning to reflect national culture, she said. Hanukkah, for example, is

a holiday of lesser religious importance to Jewish people than Passover, yet it has gained a level of recognition similar to Christmas among Americans.

Richard Chaney, associate professor of anthropology, said the changing ways traditions are celebrated, along with the changes in how they are perceived by society, are indicative of larger societal issues. He said movements to empower people have helped raise awareness about what culture really is.

"We are living through this huge transition in humanity," he said. "We are recognizing that what we've called culture is really proposed worlds."

Traditionally, cultures have developed out of a sense of people's well-being and intentions, he said. Cultures presented ideals through traditions, which people used to interpret their own lives, he said.

Sherman said traditions both reaffirm and frame who people are. Each time an event is celebrated by a group, the group is giving itself and each of its members a message for the future, she said.

"It's a sense of identity. It's a sense of identity with the past; it's a sense of identity with the future, and it's a sense of identity with the present," Sherman said. "Who we are, where we come from and where we are going. And that's very comforting. Tradition is the voice of wisdom in many ways."

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