

*Editor's Note: At press time, my family and I were vacationing in California, where inspiration was plentiful but computer time rare. The essay below was written a year ago, upon my return from a similar trip. Some circumstances have changed, but the names – and general sentiments – remain the same.*



My family and I just spent a week in California. My father-in-law was celebrating his 90th birthday, and despite vigorous protests on his part, our West Coast relatives insisted on throwing a big shindig.

Shindigging ain't easy when you're 90, but when all was said and done, Ed loved every minute of it. So did we.

We spent the first part of our trip in San Francisco. You know that famous Mark Twain saying, "the coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco?" Well, according to snopes.com, Twain never said it. But he should have. Jeff had warned me for months that it would be chilly in the city, a fact I had confirmed online, but not really wrapped my brain around. "Highs in the 60s" I kept reading, and "lows in the 50s." From down here in the Lowcountry melting pot, that sounded great to me! I cheerfully packed a couple of cotton sweaters and a zip-up sweatshirt for my daughter, all in light, sherbet-y colors. After all, it was late July. The dog days. "Cold" was a relative term, right? How bad could it be?

As we drove from the airport toward our hotel near Fisherman's Wharf, I got my first inkling. People were trudging the city sidewalks, heads down against the wind, dressed for winter! Dark wooly sweaters, leather jackets, tweedy wraps, knit hats, boots, the whole nine yards. This was the San Francisco I already knew so well... the one we visit each November around Thanksgiving. My daughter was delighted when we entered our hotel lobby to find a fire crackling in the fireplace, as usual. She tells everyone that The Argonaut is "our favorite hotel" (though this was only her third stay, and she has scant hotel experience to compare it to!), and warming our hands by the fire upon arrival is, according to her, "our tradition."

The next morning, Amelia and I bought fleece-lined windbreakers from a little shop at Fisherman's Wharf. Being a creature of tradition myself, and a strict observer of season, I chose white windbreakers.

We needed these warm jackets because we had big plans for the evening. We were taking Amelia to her first major league baseball game. Jeff is a baseball fanatic, and the Giants are his team. Bless his heart. As for me, I'm not really a sports fan (shocker, right?), but I developed an uncharacteristic affection for baseball while living in Atlanta for a couple of years during my misspent 20s. 'Tis a hard heart that passes through Atlanta, however temporarily, and doesn't fall in love with the Braves. Sometimes, I still dream at night of a young John Smoltz on the mound...

But I worried that Amelia would be disappointed by her first baseball game, and that Jeff would be disappointed by her disappointment. (I spend an inordinate amount of time fretting over such things.) After all, we were still on South Carolina time; the game started at seven, but it would feel more like ten to us. We'd had a pretty full day, riding cable cars to and fro, watching

sea lions flip and squirm at Pier 39... both “family traditions” now, which must be observed when we’re in the city, according to our daughter. Another of our hallowed traditions is sipping lattes (hot chocolate for Amelia) outside Café Trieste in North Beach, watching the parade of unconventional characters go by. (In a country of countless poseurs and weirdo-wannabees, San Francisco is the city of the genuine, true-blue eccentric. They probably don’t realize it – and might be appalled at the very suggestion – but they, too, are upholding a tradition of sorts. I tip my hat to them.)

Anyway, it had been a long day and I was worried. Would Amelia be too tired to enjoy the game? Would she be too cold? Would she just be flat out bored?

In the end, my fears were in vain. Our daughter rose to the occasion with aplomb, easily catching on to the general rules of the game, staying reasonably warm, and – most exciting for her – fulfilling her longtime ambition of owning a Giant Foam Finger. As she snuggled in my lap on the MUNI train after the game, finally giving in to exhaustion, she whispered into my neck, “Mama, I love baseball now. It’s our new tradition.”

Amelia’s only letdown during our short time in San Francisco was that we didn’t have the same bellboy we’d had last time we stayed at The Argonaut, over a year ago. (Apparently, she’d grown quite fond of him; I can’t even remember the guy.) I guess this new bellboy was messing with her sense of tradition.

I’m always tickled, and a little touched, by my daughter’s tendency to attach solemn significance to people we meet, places we go, things we do... She’s always deeming something or someone our “favorite” this, or our “usual” that, insisting that we honor them with our patronage repeatedly. She seems to make connections everywhere, establish patterns of continuity, create traditions...

She loves staying at her grandpa’s house, despite the complete absence of anything remotely child-friendly (well, okay, there is that talking parrot toy), mainly because it never changes. Her deceased grandmother’s fancy brush and mirror are always on the dresser in our bedroom, the porcelain cat sculpture never leaves the hearth, the same cereal is always in the cabinet (Honey Nuts n’ Oats, which she never eats here but loves at Grandpa’s), and the same key on the piano is forever flat. All this sameness delights my daughter; she runs from room to room making sure it’s all still there, just as it has been and, in her mind, forever shall be...

Lucky for Amelia, her grandpa is a devotee of tradition as well. Ed eats lunch at the same restaurant – Country Waffles – every single day of the year except two... and that’s only because they’re closed on Christmas and Thanksgiving. Amelia, who usually visits her grandpa only once a year, knows every waitress in the joint, most of them by name, and gets a hug from the owner, Joseph, whenever she walks through the door. The Country Waffles folks always remark on how much Amelia’s grown in a year, how beautiful she’s become... they even noticed her new haircut this time around. I watch my daughter beam under their kind appraisal, and know that, on some level, her annual visit to this place her grandpa loves – and where they love him – helps her feel grounded, nestled in the comfort and safety of her childhood, even as she marks its passing, year after year, visit by visit.

I lived in the same town – the same house, even – through my entire childhood, surrounded by siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents galore. I had the same friends from preschool through high school, and their parents were the friends of my parents. I was born in the same hospital as my mother, was raised in the church of my grandfather. Continuity... connection... tradition. I had it all in abundance, for better or worse. At best, it is my foundation; at worst, my prison.

Not so for my little girl. Amelia is an only child growing up in a town where her sole relatives are her parents. She goes to school “out of zone,” a precarious situation which could change at any time, forcing her to make a whole new set of friends. She’s grown fiercely loyal to her school in a very short time; the same goes for her church. Any suggestion, on my part, that we check out other establishments – a school, in our zone, with a special emphasis on science and math (she loves science and math!), a church with more children – well, she won’t even consider it! To do so would be tantamount to fixing the flat key on Grandpa’s piano. Unthinkable.

If I had to guess, I’d say my daughter, free of the many (sometimes suffocating) layers of family, familiarity, and custom I knew as a child, is hungry for those very things, clutching at them like a toddler clutches his blanket in a crowd of strangers.

All the way to California, Amelia couldn’t stop talking about seeing her cousins, Molly and Ben. She’d only met them a couple of times, and while they are, in fact, “cousins” of some sort, they are quite far removed. None of this matters a whit to my daughter, the only child. They are Family! Root and branches. A firm context in which to place herself. As I watched the three children frolic in the pool at my in-law Karen’s house, scene of the Great Birthday Shindig, I marveled at how easily and gracefully they played together – almost perfect strangers that morning, best friends now. We grown-ups sat around the pool watching them jump and glide, their quicksilver bodies flashing through moonlit, diamond-flecked water, their laughter blending with cricket song and conversation. Though I only see them once a year, I’ve always loved these in-laws of mine – and have always felt loved by them – and I love that my daughter will grow up knowing their children, calling them “cousin,” feeling a part of this family.

Later, Amelia stood before the birthday cake with her grandpa, both their faces glowing in candlelight, listening to stories about Ed (a veteran of three wars and 90 years of life, Ed has many stories) as we took turns toasting his remarkable life. I don’t think there was a dry eye around that table. When Ed finally spoke, this most humble man – this charter member of the “greatest generation” – said he owed all his happiness and success in life to his wonderful family. Gulp. I caught a look in Amelia’s eye – reverence? – and knew she would never forget this night. Then – poof! – Ed blew out his candles, and the moment was gone. But the memory was made, and it was a keeper, another strand in her web of belonging, another connection - to her family, to her past, to her self.

Custom... continuity... connection. Children crave these things. We all do, I think, though the world sometimes seems bent on telling us they’re unimportant.

When we boarded the plane in San Francisco that would take us home – or at least as far as Atlanta – Amelia put her hand in mine and asked, as she always does, “Mom, can I have the window seat?”

“Of course you can,” I replied. “It’s our tradition.”