

**B469. "Fill Empty Hearts, Empty Chairs at Holiday Table." Houston Chronicle, (November 23, 2003) p. 1C.**

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Thanksgiving is supposed to be the quintessential family holiday. However, for the first time, more than half of my students will not be going home for the holiday this year. The immediate explanation they give is that airlines have increased fares beyond what they can afford. However, after some probing, I find that many of them have a more troubling reason for not going home: They are sick and tired of having to deal with conflicts between their divorced parents over whose home they should visit. "It's enough that I have to deal with this during Christmas," one of them told me.

Many of my students are the children of divorced parents and fathers and mothers with new mates, and many have a whole slew of stepbrothers and sisters -- who come with their own relations. Some students have two and three sets of "parents" within what sociologists half-jokingly call "the ex-kinship structure."

The result all too often is that there is no home that students are keen to go back to, and deciding which of the multiple abodes to visit adds to the tension -- which they avoid by staying put. Berkeley senior Melanie Pellerin told the San Francisco Chronicle that she chose not to go home because of her parents' nasty divorce. She added: "My dad doesn't cook, so if I went to his house, I would have had to do the cooking. Then my mom would have gotten mad." By staying on campus, she said, she could avoid "all of that drama." One of my students, who asked not to be quoted by name, says she hates to go to either of her divorced parents' homes because of "all those misfits" -- referring to her stepsisters and stepbrothers.

Instead of going home, more and more students do what foreigners have been doing at least since I started teaching at Columbia University in 1958: They either accept invitations from professors who invite them to their homes or make their own feasts. Thus, Jean Folkerts, GWU's associate vice president for special academic initiatives, has extended an open invitation to undergraduate and graduate students to join her at her home for Thanksgiving. And Laura, who chose not to share her last name, will help organize a "pot luck" Thanksgiving dinner in which a bunch of friends will each bring a dish. Others will join the 20 percent of Americans who will order their meal from one take-out place or another.

Some of these students will have a good time spending the evening in a professor's home or with their best friends. But these are people they can visit all year long. There is something undeniably sad about their spending Thanksgiving, of all holidays, away from their families. True, Christmas is also a family-centered holiday, but it is a much more religious one. (Many more people go to church on that day than on Thanksgiving.) Hence, many Americans who are not Christian or not religious feel awkward during Christmas time. But all -- with the notable exception of Native Americans -- feel quite at home celebrating Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving away from home just does not feel quite right.

What might be done?

Given that Thanksgiving has already been rescheduled several times, moving it to the last Thursday of October would make it much easier on everyone, and especially on students. As it stands, many students feel that they cannot afford two trips so close to one another and

that they can hardly work out the tensions involved in one family visit before they must face them once again during Christmas.

We need a new Emily Post to issue a guidebook on what is proper conduct during the holiday season. (Suggested rule: If parents live far apart, then one parent gets a visit during Thanksgiving and the other during Christmas, and next year, the other way around).

Surely, we need a rule that all hostilities in the ex-kinship structure must be suspended during the holidays. (Actually, there are a bunch of books that address these issues, but none have caught on as authoritative.)

Best, we need to teach interpersonal communication skills and conflict resolution in high schools so that there will be fewer divorces, and when they do take place, the divorced parents will be prepared to deal more civilly with each other.

Truth be told, unless there is some kind of major reversal of the trends that have been unfolding for more than a generation, more and more young people will end up spending Thanksgiving with each other rather than with their parents. Maybe as this becomes even more common, it will seem less out of place, another step in the adaptation of society to the decline of the family.

Call me old-fashioned, but for me, it still seems an odd way to celebrate Thanksgiving. At the very least, colleges should provide even more buses, and help arrange charter flights and airline discounts so that shortness of funds will not prevent students from going home.