



By Silver Rose

On Thursday many of us will gather around a food-laden table with family and friends, presumably to celebrate those things in our life for which we are thankful.

If you are envisioning this with dread because one or more relatives or friends ruin it for you every year, then read on. There are some things you can do about it.

I am no stranger to annoying relatives. I have some and I have been one and probably still am. My siblings could regale you with tales of Thanksgivings past when I tried to control everything including seating arrangements lighting, timing and injecting a “no TV during dinner rule.” Can you say “controlling?” It wasn’t even my house!

Of course the flip side of that was how annoying *they* were when they resisted my brilliant suggestions. Some of them teased, others got mean and the worst were those who merely dismissed me. They ruined the holiday for me!

Ah, excuse me. *Who* ruined it? Mirror, mirror on the wall...

What follows are a few things I’ve learned from both sides of this equation:

- **You get what you expect.** If you are already anticipating the day with a sinking heart and an ache in the pit of your stomach, you’re in trouble. Sit down *today* and rewrite the script. I mean that literally. Sit down with pen and paper and write a story in third person with you as the hero/heroine. In your story everything turns out for the best. Example, *“Even though she saw her brother roll his eyes when she asked if they could each say something they were thankful for, it didn’t bother her. She knew she couldn’t control what he thought.”*

Instead of anticipating problems, why not anticipate a day where the usual triggers don’t bother you at all? You’ll be amazed at how well this works.

- **Memorize the serenity prayer.** Even if you’re not spiritual or religious, this works as an affirmation: *Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change (like people), the courage to change the things I can (like not letting others get to you), and the wisdom to know the difference.*
- **Pick your battles.** If Uncle Joe is drunk and he always gets insulting when he’s drunk, is that the time to give

## Dancing with those Negative Family Members

him a lesson in etiquette? Probably not. Instead of being hurt or angry, why not see him as someone who is (a) very troubled and (b) incapable of hurting you without your permission.

- **Don’t sucker punch.** Families are often too blunt with each other. If you need to tell a family member something that might sting, use this method: *“There’s something I need to say to you and it might upset you. That’s not my intention.”* This method is so effective! Instead of hitting your sister with something she wasn’t expecting, you give her a warning. This allows her a bit of time to steel herself. I can promise you that whatever she conjures up in her head will be infinitely worse than what you finally say.

**Cynical/negative people really care.** My father was pretty grouchy. He didn’t think the glass was half full or half empty—he wanted to know what was in it and who put it there? (Did I mention he was also suspicious?) After decades of observation (mine—he wasn’t committed) I realized that Dad was passionately negative because he really cared about the issues he complained about. He also felt powerless. Roz and Ben Zander wrote about this in **The Art of Possibility**, “A cynic is a passionate person who does not want to be disappointed again.”

SO, if you have a relative that gets all worked up this year, instead of trying to calm him down or just ignoring him (which as you know will only inspire him to repeat his points only more loudly), try saying, “You really care about this issue, don’t you?” It may not stop him forever but he’ll be so shocked that you get it that it may stop him for a breath or two. If nothing else, you’ll score points.

- **Respond, versus react.** What is ultimately true is that the only person you are able to control, Thanksgiving or not, is you. So you can choose to react (which puts the person who pushed your button in charge of your emotions) or you can respond (which puts you firmly in charge).

I once heard a psychologist explain it best. When you react, the small child inside you is controlling you. When you respond, your adult is at the helm. Even if you’re the only “adult” present on Thursday isn’t that preferable? Think how peacefully you’ll be able to sleep that night! (Added bonus: no apologies to make!)

Please know that one of the things I am very grateful for this Thanksgiving is the privilege it is to be able to “talk” with you via this blog. I love it when you talk back so please feel free to write with kudos, criticisms or topic suggestions. Have a happy!