

Behind the Camera at Thanksgiving

by TRISH McLEAN

The family unit has changed with surprising contradictions and complexity.

The rate of divorce is declining but more people are choosing not to get married, and the dissolution of those relationships is not noted in Canadian Statistics. A whopping 1 in 5 children witness their parents separate before they turn 18. Young adults living with parents is the new norm with over 50% of adults in their twenties living with a parent in Ontario and yet adult children are cutting their parents out of their lives on an unprecedented scale.

There is a rising tide of family estrangement with 1 in 4 adults acknowledging that they have terminated a relationship with a family member, contributing to a ubiquitous cloud of loneliness that has seeped into every corner of society.

The black and white statistics trickle down into holidays and translate into escalated conflict between partners, in-laws banging on doors or refusing to pick up the phone, kids fought over and shuttled like sheep from one home to the next; raised voices, sobs, and silence. For most, Thanksgiving was an echo of Easter, a wash and repeat of family drama, seemingly inescapable and unchanging.

I sometimes ask my clients in distress, 'If you knew this relationship wouldn't change, that it would look and feel the same in five years' time as it does today, would you stay?'

We walk away when we give up hope; and yet walking away can be as costly as staying. If you knew Christmas 2024 would look very much like Thanksgiving 2024, would you make any changes?

Many of us feel hopeless and helpless in the face of chronic family conflict. Our families are like tangled webs of wire twisted, welded, cut and scrap thrown away. It seems an impossible task to right the wrongs, reunite son with father, wife with mother-in-law, and heal the rifts that divide us.

In many instances, we are correct; it is not possible to force an estranged child to the table, or turn the volume down on a toxic ex. There is no reverse button on time. We can only move forward from here; but we can move forward.

The old axiom holds true, we can't control what other people do, what they think, feel and how they behave, but we can choose what we do, what we think, and how we feel. As Einstein famously said, 'insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.' The challenge is in deciding what to change.

Christmas is 10 weeks away ? now is the time to think about what you want to do differently.

It may be as simple as deciding where, when and who you will spend Christmas with, now ? to avoid the last-minute scramble and bitter battles of last weekend. Perhaps, it means setting a budget, and putting the money aside now, to steer clear of financial stress and debt. It may be a more complex decision, such as to say no to your mother when she tugs the umbilical cord and to align yourself unwaveringly with your partner.

There are common themes familiar to all families, yet each one is unique. The way forward may be obvious and obtainable, or it may feel insurmountable. You may need someone on the outside to talk to, someone who understands the complexities of family dynamics and can help you navigate your way through the maelstrom of emotions. You have time; you have two-and-a-half months to work through what you want to do differently this Christmas season.