Celebrations

Family, Food, and Fireworks

Timothy Lovett

PRE-READING: consider these vocabulary words: cornerstone, Mecca, tandem.

“The bombs bursting in air gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.” I always think of that line from the “Star Spangled Banner” while I’m watching the fireworks on July 4th. But it’s not just my country’s independence from Britain that’s on my mind. July 4th is a time for family and for food. When I was a kid, the hardest part about this holiday was the day before, when my refrigerator was filled with food that I was not allowed to eat—container upon container of marinating meat, taunting me with anticipation because tomorrow would be the Fourth of July. My Fourth of July was always filled with family, food, and fireworks.

At our July 4th picnic, grandmothers, great-aunts, and great-uncles hand down their history and knowledge through gospels and hymns.

Every year my family would have a picnic at Lake View Park. Generations of family, tradition, and culture gathered together as a reminder of our history, and also as a template for our future. The youngest family members became acquainted with each other through play; no child could resist the call of Lake View’s jungle gym or the gentle waves of Lake Erie. The older kids, who were still too young to be considered adults, acted as chaperones for the children. You could always spot the chaperones because they were grouped in huddles, and they would stand just far enough away from the children to look like they didn’t care, but close enough to react if need be.

My aunts and uncles would catch up with each other and reminisce about the old days. They would indulge in alcoholic beverages and laugh at their growing pains. My Great Aunt Lill in this picture; she is one of the elders who looked over the family, and she is one of the strongest women I know. She is one of the cornerstones of our family. Year after year, she keeps our traditions going. Anyone who needs food or a place to stay, she goes out of her way to provide it. All she asks in return is that you go to church on Sunday. Oh, and you are going to church because, come
Sunday, Aunt Lill is coming to get you, rain, sleet, or snow.

At our July 4th picnic, grandmothers, great-aunts, and great-uncles hand down their history and knowledge through gospels and hymns. When they speak, everyone respectfully listens, and when they sing, we all join in the chorus. “People come and go, but family stays eternal.”

My family may get together at other times during the summer to cook out, but this is the Mecca of all cookouts. At no other time will this volume or variety of meat be cooked and consumed. Charcoal and gas grills work in tandem filling the sky with an aromatic roar. My cousin Glen says it serves as a warning to all the other cookouts that he is the Alpha chef, and it’s true. His burgers, chicken, fish, kabobs, steaks, ribs, pork chops, seafood, and even his hot dogs are scrumptious. From sun-up to sun-down, meat is being barbecued using the family recipe, which has been entrusted to my cousin. It is a special honor to cook for my family; it is a rite of passage, and only one or two men share in this ritual. The rest of us bring meat, side dishes, and support products to contribute to the picnic. Then we sit down to eat as a family, the elders bless the food, and then we stuff ourselves full of tradition.

At night, the fireworks take place on the beach. We all gather together on the boardwalk to watch the fireworks replace the silent night with thunderous booms and beautiful embers. The Independence Day celebration is a reminder of the ideals on which the nation was founded and that freedom is not free. Many people died to gain or preserve the liberties we enjoy today. I don’t agree with all of America’s history or its policies, but at the end of the day, I am an American. So when I hear the heart-stopping explosion of fireworks, I imagine those are the sounds of war. And when I see the sky raining with flashes of embers, I imagine that those are beacons to illuminate our flag on the battlefield, and, yes, our flag was still there. This is an American tradition; therefore it is my family’s tradition because we are American, and so we celebrate this day, with a barbecue and a bang.

From sun-up to sun-down, meat is being barbecued using the family recipe, which has been entrusted to my cousin.

On Patriotism

What do you think the author means when he says, “I don’t agree with all of America’s history or its policies, but at the end of the day, I am an American”?

Discuss various ways that different groups within the United States might relate differently to the idea of being an American.

Add to your knowledge of history. Watch this 4-minute video of Morgan Freeman reading a speech by Frederick Douglass, which he was asked to deliver on July 4, 1952: <www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass/videos/the-meaning-of-july-4th-for-the-negro>.