

November 28, 2011

Letter from Lost Prairie

Gratitude

Over forty years ago I went to attend a tea party in Cambridge. My friend, the host, greeted me at the door and told me that “the large American and his Danish girlfriend had eaten most of the crumpets and cakes.” I accompanied him across the street to the bakery to stock up on some more goodies. Then my friend asked me to talk with the American and his friend because they didn’t know anyone. I remember enjoying this conversation. John had arrived about a month earlier on a Harvard scholarship to study at Cambridge. A few weeks later I received an invitation to a black tie dinner at Emmanuel College to celebrate Thanksgiving. At the time I knew nothing about this American celebration and had to ask! Our children know the rest of this love story. We ask all parents applying to Montana Academy for their student to tell us something about such fateful meetings since they provide us with the foundation for intimate knowledge about each family.

John and I have developed the custom of attending the Montana Academy Thanksgiving feast with our students. The tables are arranged around the perimeter of the dining area and are festively decorated with pumpkins and autumn leaves. Students may sit with friends as they please rather than necessarily with teammates. There is a fine traditional meal of roast turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, yams with gravy and cranberry relish as well as a livid green pistachio pudding which tastes infinitely better than it looks. And, of course, there are always homemade pies for dessert.

Team 2 regularly sponsors an “adopt a family” for the holidays. They offer a variety of options such as a dinner for two, taking over Super Clean for a team, a manicure and a pedicure or a team smoothie and dessert night. On Thanksgiving they began raising money by encouraging students to send candy grams to one another. Plenty of candy was still lying on the table when everyone assembled for dinner. Darrick brought his children and they helped him and their grandmother, Mary’l, to serve the dinner.

But before the feast it is time for expressions of gratitude. John started by talking about this occasion and the opportunity that it provides him to think about things in his own life for which he is grateful. Beyond the circle of our family he relishes the opportunity to be involved in the day to day interactions with your teenagers, to see their promise and to watch them blossom during their time at the ranch.

Sometimes in the past I have told the story of my meeting with John and my first Thanksgiving dinner. This time I told the students that the longer I lived the more I felt that I had to be thankful for. My husband is top of my list and I am grateful for his steadfast companionship and a long marriage. Then there are our three daughters, grown into fine young women who are thoughtful and engaged in productive lives. Our middle daughter, Moira, finishes medical school this year and has plans to become a psychiatrist like her father. She has become engaged this year to a fellow medical student. We find Justin to be a wonderful addition to our family. They came with us to celebrate at the ranch. Then there are the joys of productive work, in particular the meetings with parents and the selection of students for Montana Academy and the satisfaction of watching students learn and grow at the ranch. There is also the fellowship of working with dedicated staff who make this community hum as they pour themselves into the daily lives of our students. This satisfying work takes place in a location of great natural beauty which feeds my spirit each and every day. I have also in recent years had the opportunity, as some of you may know, to indulge my curiosity in the world by taking the opportunity to travel when the school census is full. All these riches seem to me to be blessings at this stage of my relatively long life.

Our students, too, were willing to count their blessings publicly around the table. Almost everyone expressed gratitude to their family, for renewed relationships with them, for close friendships on the ranch, for second (or more) chances, for their sobriety and for the help of staff. A few veered away from these conventional themes. One boy said that he was thankful for feeling comfortable at last in his own skin. Another spoke of his gratitude for a laid back day with his good friends while he thinks with sorrow that he will be leaving them soon. A girl spoke of how much she loves the beauty that surrounds her in Montana. Another valued her close relationship with her sister. Our newest girl said that she was grateful for a warm welcome to this community. I couldn't help thinking how much all the families were missing their children on this holiday and wanted to share their thoughts

with you. I know that you are looking forward to seeing your sons and daughters again very soon.

Best wishes for the holidays,

Rosemary McKinnon