

# The Holidays

## OUR EPOCHAL STRING OF FESTIVITIES DEFINING THE SEASON

By Susanne Meyer-Fitzsimmons



Christmas was always magical, but also a bit mystical in my childhood; in Germany, it was a tad more reflective and solemn. Halloween is not a widespread custom in Europe, and Thanksgiving is particular to this country. Imbuing them with a combination of meaning and mindfulness, sparkle and joyfulness lends to enjoying this whole long period of wonderfulness. The whole string of celebrations from Halloween all the way to New Year's.



Photograph by Susanne Meyer-Fitzsimmons

After the hayride we would come back to a big pot full of chili and gather around the fire pit while the children examined their loot.



Photograph by Simone Coegel Eisold

# Gift Wrapping

Gift wrapping can be a meditative, creative and truly pleasurable activity. Put some time aside, gather all your materials and presents, listen to some music, make a cup of hot spice tea or pour yourself a glass of wine, then wrap, wrap, wrap with abandon. Besides traditional wrapping paper, you can use other materials such as newspaper, a piece of leftover fabric, inexpensive tissue paper, translucent cellophane wrap, or Kraft paper. Attach small pinecones, bells, or other miniature items, and play with ribbons – wide, narrow, curling, making fancy bows. I prefer the softness and quality of fabric ribbon which I always buy on sale whenever I see some because it can be quite costly otherwise. I have also been known to cut gift wrap into strips to transform into bows when I've run out of ribbon. I reuse gift boxes, ribbons, and gift bags without guilt as long as they look good. Usually I cut my own gift tags from a matching piece of construction paper, paper shopping bag, or cardboard with pinking shears, any shape I fancy, making a hole with a hole punch, and voilà.



Photograph by Simone Coegel Eisold

# Decorations

Nature creates the most beautiful items to repurpose as seasonal home decorations, whether to attach to a present, use in a table centerpiece or a vase, or decorate a mantel or sideboard with. Think pumpkins, gourds, and squashes; pinecones, acorns, beechnuts, grasses and branches with berries; whole nuts; dried leaves and bird feathers. Go for a walk and be inspired. But what truly contributes to the magic of the season is twinkle lights and candles. Use lots of them. Play with tealights in votive holders, arrange several fat candles with ribbons or natural elements on a plate, platter, or wood slab, interweave strings of twinkle lights in a mantel arrangement or in a big bouquet of seasonal greens.

## Giving

What touches me more than anything is receiving a present that speaks exactly to who I am. A truly personal gift has been chosen mindfully for one particular person and is presented with intent. It has to do with the heart and soul put into it, understanding the person and what would give them pleasure. Also, presents are elevated manifold by a beautiful presentation. Being mindful takes time, and slowing down is something this pandemic has given us to do. But now we can use it as a silver lining and make this holiday season a bit more meaningful and thoughtful.



Photograph by Andrea B. Swanson



## Ritual

Helping young children make their own Halloween costumes is fun and engages the imagination — a robot costume made with boxes, a home sewn pumpkin poncho, a cat costume, or a dragon with claws made from wooden ice cream scoopers. After trick-or-treating up and down the country road of our hamlet, the local farmer invited the neighborhood children on a hayride across the dark fields, a highlight of our Halloweens for many years until the children grew up. After the hayride we would come back to our house to a big pot full of chili we shared with and gather around the fire

pit while the children examined their loot. Rituals like this gives a celebration structure, rendering it more meaningful and slows it down, and its repetition provides comfort.

Last year, we incorporated a new idea for Thanksgiving ritual making ribboned scrolls of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving address for everyone to bring home, and took turns reading the sections while we sipped some bubbly before we starting the festive meal.

While we decorate the house for Advent after Thanksgiving, in Germany we don't put the tree up until just before Christmas. When I was little, the door of the living room remained closed on Christmas Eve while my parents decorated the tree. The anticipation! When it was dark, the door finally opened to the Christmas tree lit with real candles and presents underneath. What enchantment! We have always maintained the custom of opening presents on the Eve because nighttime can be magical for us, combining a festive meal with taking turns unwrapping presents, one at a time, each person enjoying the sparkle in the others' eyes as they unwrap their gift.

According to an old custom we read everyone's fortune on New Year's Eve before midnight. A lead figurine is melted over a candle, tossed into a big bucket of water, and the ensuing shape is interpreted as the new year's fortune. Make up your own rituals that go with your family and ancestor's history. Making enchantment and creating lasting traditions is so meaningful. Nothing is more wonderful than seeing your children incorporating some of them into their own lives as they grow up.

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# Grandmother's German Christmas Spice Cookies

## COOKIES

- 1 stick (125 gr) cold butter
- 2 ⅓ cups (320 gr) all-purpose flour
- 1 TBSP baking powder
- 3/4 cups (50 gr) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 ⅓ cups (300 gr) sugar
- 2 eggs
- ½ TBSP ground cloves
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp ground nutmeg

## ICING

- 1 ⅓ cup (157 gr) powdered confectioners sugar
- 2 TBSP cold water

Combine flour, baking powder and cocoa in a mixer, add sugar and eggs until blended. Cut cold butter into small pieces and add to mixer together with the spices, gradually add flour and mix until the dough comes together in a ball. Spread flour on your work surface and on top of the dough to avoid sticking to the pastry pin, roll dough out about ¼ inch thick, and cut cookies with your favorite cookie cutters. Place cookies on lightly greased cookie sheets and bake at 350 degrees Fahrenheit for about 15 minutes. The cookies will be slightly soft when ready and will harden as they cool. Once cold, prepare the icing by sifting the confectioner's sugar into a bowl and adding the water gradually until the icing is just liquid enough to spread in a thick coating over the cookies.

