

Tidepools 2003: Celebration

Reading the definition, you'd think the staff at Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary had never been to one.

"Refraining from ordinary business," they write, primly. "To mark (as an anniversary) by deviation from routine."

Ah. And this is meant to account for

Christmas,

Juneteenth,

Cinco de Mayo,

Groundhog Day,

Bloomsday,

Thanksgiving,

Shrove Tuesday,

St. Agnes' Eve,
Labor Day,
Easter,
Yom Kippur,
your mom's birthday,
July 4th,
and the day you make
the last payment on your
student loans.

"Deviation from routine"
is clearly a phrase forged
by dour workaholics who
never saw the point of a
four-day weekend.

In a very limited sense, though, they're right: celebrations seem to have only their deviations in common. Private celebrations generate their own idiosyncratic rituals--the salary increase tango; the acceptance letter endzone spike--and nationally recognised holidays come prepackaged with color schemes and iconography and helpful gift suggestions. Some holidays stay in one place, their calendar addresses as familiar as our own; others are movable feasts, appearing capriciously one week or the next depending on which Thursday it is, or what phase the moon is in, or any one of the countless obscure indicators we use to determine when

to start pounding the moschi or brightening the Sukkot booth.

Decorating, whether ourselves or our yards or our offerings, can be considered one of the hallmarks of celebration. (Pun intended; the paraphernalia of holidays are a source of considerable income in America.) Wrapping paper, helium balloons, boutonnieres and flag socks are all manifestations of the same single impulse to publicly declare our affinity for the communal mood: Kiss me, I'm Irish. The days have costumes most of us honor, even if we no longer know why pumpkins have faces and turkeys wear tall hats and buckled shoes. The extroverts compete, installing enough bats or hearts or animatronic reindeer to make their neighborhoods visible from space; the shy send cards with sweetly seasonal stamps. Less vehement persons may modify the symbols--putting demure white candles in their windows rather than JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON in road flares on the roof--but even the infidels will light something up.

Celebrations do seem to call for emblematic lighting--think of luminaria, sparklers, paschal and birthday candles, Rudolph's nose. Celebrations also tend to involve chocolates or pastries or cakes ceremonially frosted, and some kind of cheer-inducing beverage, whether it's the tequila or the champagne punch variety. Which raises an interesting question: are celebrations primarily a means for a lot of us to get our hands on a whole lot of sugar, alcohol, and fire, simultaneously? What thirst does celebration slake?

For many of us, events of the past year have made the theme of celebration incongruous at best and callous at worst. In the presence of grief, celebrating seems impossible. But when grief burns down to ashes and life reasserts itself, what then? The poet Dylan Thomas exhorts us to "rage, rage against the dying of the light," turning our grief into fury and pitting ourselves, however bootlessly, against the dark eddies of time and loss. Celebration, though, gives us an entirely different option: to come together, and fill the darkness with fireworks.

Jane Mushinsky

In memoriam



Lisa Santacroce, 1963-2001
