THE DANGERS OF TRADITION

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I recently read a story:

> *A young girl is in the kitchen with her mother and they're about to cook a pot roast, using a recipe that's been handed down from one generation to another. The first step is to cut the ends off the roast. The young girls wants to know why. The mother tells her "It's just tradition," She's unsatisfied with that answer, so when she visits her grandma a week later, she asks her the same question. "It's tradition," her grandma says. "That's the way my mother always did it." So after all this, the girl gets a chance to visit her great-grandmother. She's excited about putting the question to Grammie and so, even before she's taken her coat off, she asks: "Grammie, why cut the ends off the roast first before cooking it?" Her great-grandmother looks at her and smiles, saying, "When I first wrote the recipe, my pan was too small to fit the entire roast."*

I like the story because it highlights how, at times, the things that we hold dear, that we consider traditions, can be rooted in groundless ideas. Yet despite this, society relies on convention, and traditions are a key part of these conventions – many of them without any real rhyme or reason. Think about everyone in a courtroom standing when the judge enters, or if it really makes a difference whether that judge gets to slam their gavel against a sound block to end the court session. Think of some of the things that we take for granted, like throwing our caps into the air during a graduation ceremony, installing a dead fir tree in our homes for a couple of weeks in December, or secretly exchanging a child's lost teeth for a quarter or two. Ask yourself why we can do these things. Better yet, ask Grammie.

But what is tradition really?

Traditions are beliefs and practices passed down within a group or society. Tradition alone isn't a bad or worthless idea. Traditions help reinforce values. Some say they represent a critical aspect of our culture and form the structure and foundation of our society by connecting us to history and bringing people together. Maybe throwing our caps into the air doesn't just make us happy; it also makes us believe we are connected to all those graduates that have gone before us, and those that will come behind us.

Still, the fact remains that we often follow traditions without question, and while there are many worthwhile traditions, there are some that connect us to history and culture at the risk and detriment of others. This is when reverence for tradition can become a dangerous thing.

Dangerous Traditions

There are many dangerous traditions that continue to be practiced today.

Here are just a few examples:

The Running of the Bulls

The Running of the Bulls takes place every year in Pamplona, Spain, during the nine-day festival of Sanfermines. During the second week in July, a group of cattle is let loose on a closed course on the town's streets. Hundreds of people run ahead of the cattle, trying their best not to be trampled. The tradition dates back to the 14th century: When cattle were being transported to market, people would hurry them along by running with them and creating a frenzy. It then became a tradition. But every year, over 200 people are injured during the Running of the Bulls, and since 1925, over a dozen people have died.

Hazing

Hazing is the ritual of humiliating others as part of an initiation into an exclusive group. People sometimes make those wishing to join their organization run simple errands, but they have also been known to subject candidates to extreme forms of abuse. People "pledging" to join college fraternities and sororities have been bound and blindfolded, beaten, and forced to drink alcohol to the point of poisoning – all in the name of tradition and ritual, something that every member has had to go through.

The effects of hazing can be consequential. They can include both physical and mental trauma, hospitalization, or even death. According to Franklin College journalism professor Hank Nuwer, there have been over 200 university hazing deaths since 1838, with 40 deaths taking place between 2007 and 2017. Most of these deaths were alcohol-related.

Land Diving

Every spring, in the Republic of Vanuatu, an island country in the South Pacific Ocean, men participate in land diving, one of the most dangerous ceremonies in the world. The men jump off ninety-foot-high wooden towers with two tree vines wrapped around their ankles. They dive headfirst towards the ground, hoping that the vines will stop their fall just before impact.

The tradition is said to have come from a woman who did it to escape her abusive husband. Women used to perform this annual ritual in honor of her, but the ceremony was taken over by men. Today, the land diving ritual is related to the annual yam harvest. A good dive is said to ensure that there will be a good harvest. For the young, it is a rite of passage. Boys can start as early as eight years old, with the highest plank reserved for the most experienced divers.

Land diving has resulted in its far share of deaths and injuries. Before diving, the men usually settle any unfinished business and disputes they might have. Famously, during a 1974 visit to Vanuatu, Queen Elizabeth of England witnessed a land diving ceremony performed in her honor. Unfortunately, one man lost his life when the vines snapped.

When is enough, enough?

Should the likes of land diving and hazing be allowed to continue? Sometimes governments ban traditions that they consider harmful. For instance, many local governments in the United States have made it illegal for residents to set off fireworks in their yards or in the streets outside their homes on the Fourth of July. Every year, this traditional celebration leads to fires, injuries, and even deaths. These bans are meant to promote public safety.

But a government can also ban traditions for darker reasons. In the 1800s, England ruled over Ireland, a rule that many Irish disliked and fought against. The Irish used a common local plant, the shamrock, as a symbol of their national identity and their longing to be free. Queen Victoria of England banned all soldiers in her armies—including those who came from Ireland—from wearing a traditional shamrock on their hats on St. Patrick's Day. This ban was a way of reinforcing her power over people who did not want her as their ruler. It was just one of the many ways in which England repressed the voice of the Irish during that time.

So who should decide whether a tradition is harmful and needs to stop? Perhaps it is up to each person to question the traditions they follow and determine whether they do more harm than good.

Source:
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