



ONTARIO ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

(A Division of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy)

"Helping with life's most precious relationships"

Choosing a Family to Love

This February 18th marks Ontario's first Family Day. Great idea! No? Think this new holiday is not for you? Your family members live far away? You're an only child? Your partner or parents are gone? You're single? You haven't spoken to your brother in twenty years? You have nothing in common with your family? You just plain dislike them?

Maybe you hold with the tired wisdom; "Friends you can choose; your family you're stuck with." If that ever was true, it isn't now, not in 2008. Increasingly, family is chosen, woven together from the tenuous threads of experience and affection which connect us all. Family is not so much about blood relationship as about care and nurture, about civility, hospitality and the opening of the heart.

I began to understand this when our family expanded with the adoption of two wonderful girls. Adoption was a personal choice as it was for our children's birth mothers. I am forever thankful for these two courageous women who remain emotionally and spiritually a part of our extended family.

Having arrived at this particular insight, I've been choosing my family for years. And I intend to celebrate these relationships on this first Family Day. Here is a sampling of the special branches of my family tree:

- honorary aunts (uncles); especially a single friend who helped welcome my children and who now treats each new grandchild with undisguised delight.
- the staff at the nursing home who care for my confused and weakening mother as if she were their own, and who comfort me when I weep.
- our Vietnamese student, who ran into our arms and hearts last September and who has kept us learning and laughing ever since. And his sister and his parents. We shall have sticky noodles to celebrate Family Day.
- church people who have supported my children during adversity, sent in warm suppers, shingled a roof between rain showers.
- mentors, who opened my mind to possibility
- friends who accept eccentricities and who without awkwardness, pick up threads of conversation despite a lapse of weeks, months or even years.
- the sponsor children of our multi-generational family. They live in Africa and Pakistan and help us teach our youngest members about other ways of being in the world.
- my mother's childhood friend, who sends cards, pictures, notes and calls often to ask after someone who can no longer respond in kind. Thus, a relationship which has endured for more than eighty years is undaunted by dementia.
- in-laws, that most maligned and misunderstood branch on the tree. I've been blessed, truly. They are 'the honourables' who love the same people I love. I make a choice to put them on this list.

No family to speak of? Make February 18th the day you honour a family of your own choosing. Call. Email or send a card. Make a date to meet. Connect. Sometimes water is thicker than blood.

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