

## The Birthday Boy

Birthdays were barely celebrated in my family, but in my wife's family, birthdays were occasions of great celebration, a special day devoted just to you!

Looks like we might be headed for trouble here, especially when you consider that my exaggerated hesitation to celebrate birthdays needed to be offset by her larger-than-life birthday recollections. I hasten to assure you that my wife and I did celebrate the birthdays of our children.

How do I account for my inbred hesitation? Well, for one thing, my brother and I shared the same birthday date, two years apart. I am the older. Sad to report, the day was neither all mine nor all his, it was equal. Whatever little gift we each received – please emphasize little – the two gifts were exactly the same. My mother always made a point of being scrupulously fair. “You can't give one thing to one child without giving the same thing to the other” was her constant refrain when talking to friends and relatives about how she handled our double birthday.

And because the gifts were always the same, there was no individual sense of surprise. In fact, I don't remember the gifts even being wrapped; perhaps they were, but why should they be? If I opened mine first, my brother would know what his gift was, and vice versa. It was always a shared experience. We were separate individuals with different personalities, but on this day, August 21, we were judged to be equal and the same – it was only fair.

To top it off – you won't believe this – when my mother remarried, she chose a husband who had the same birth date as my brother and me.

I offer a word of caution: if expectant mothers (or fathers) even think about trying to arrange a birth on the same day as one of your already-born, please don't. And when you remarry, if your prospective spouse has a birthday date the same as one of your children, forget it.

After we had children, the only birthday celebration I tried to control was my own. Speaking with you honestly, if I had my own way, there would have been no celebration. Needless to say, my wife and children found my

avoidance of birthday celebrations unsatisfactory and would make a celebration for me anyway, whether I liked it or not. Let me tread lightly here; I was very appreciative of their thoughtfulness and probably would have had my feelings hurt if they hadn't done something, but even so, I didn't like the celebration part of it.

The straw that broke this camel's back was the family's celebration of my 50th birthday. I was sitting in front of the television, watching a life-or-death Raiders football game, when the doorbell rang. I let one of the girls get it, but she said it was for me. I was annoyed. I did not want to go, but she was insistent. And there they were. "Surprise!" shouted an assorted collection of friends and associates. I was dressed in grubby clothes and completely disoriented. A person who would walk three miles around to avoid a social occasion or party was now the center of such an occasion. But it was much worse than that; I was the captive audience for the choreographed and contrived advances of a hired, not-so-young woman who showered me with various birthday paraphernalia while affecting some intimacy. Part of her act, as I remember it, was chanting some off-color doggerel that was meant to amuse the partygoers at my expense. You would have had to be me (count your blessings you were not!) to appreciate my personal sense of embarrassment, all the while trying to smile and play the good sport.

As providence, good fortune, and luck would have it, I lived long enough to observe my 60th birthday. This time I was prepared. I announced right up front that I would be the one to plan a family celebration of this milestone occasion. I would organize a family dinner at Jack's restaurant in San Francisco, one of my favorites from the 1960's era.

Would you believe that I couldn't pull off something as simple as this? Why, you ask? For one thing, my brother's daughter wanted to be married on Saturday, the evening before her father's birthday, which you will recall is also my birthday, and that of my stepfather. No problem, until I found out that Jack's was closed on Sundays.

I inquired about hiring Jack's to open on Sunday just for my occasion. The owners were willing, but I had to guarantee and pay for a minimum of 25 people. My God, I don't even know 25 people to invite to my home, let alone invite them to Jack's in San Francisco. And besides, it would cost a small

fortune to host 25 people at Jack's. My original idea was to invite only my family and allow each daughter to bring her current boyfriend. Even that number at Jack's would have been a budget stretch.

So Jack's was out. Now what? I let precious weeks slip by, racking my brain, trying to come up with a special setting for my own birthday. I thought of a dinner cruise on the Sacramento River. I was able to locate a yacht used by the owner for just such occasions. The captain/owner said he would cook a gourmet meal, provide the wine and champagne, hire a musician or two, and take us on a three-hour cruise in the early evening. "It is that extra hour that makes all the difference," he said, explaining why I should avoid his two-hour competitor. I drove down river to Clarksburg to see the yacht. It looked like a yacht all right, but it didn't seem very luxurious to me. He assured me it would be all spit and polish for the grand occasion. The yacht was good sized, but I just couldn't imagine getting 14 people onboard and still having the room to move around the deck and in the interior cabin, which seemed small and claustrophobic, nothing like the stateroom I had imagined. Maybe I had really been thinking about a cruise ship or an aircraft carrier. Finally, when I thought about cruising in the early evening heat of a late August day on the Sacramento River, it just didn't seem either quite elegant or comfortable enough for my taste.

I thought of the Sunday brunch at the elegant and upscale Garden Court in the turn-of-the-century Palace Hotel. I had been to the Garden Court once before, in 1966, the year we were married, for an early Thanksgiving dinner. I enjoyed it immensely – the food, the elegance of the room, the string quartet, the attentive service – this, I announced to my bride of five months, was my idea of what a Thanksgiving Day dinner should be. (Twenty-seven years later, I found out that my wife thought it was the worst Thanksgiving Day she had ever experienced. Just call me insensitive and a slow learner, and I'll continue on with my story.)

I made my decision; the Garden Court for Sunday brunch would be the site for my 60th birthday. And it was just as I had remembered, elegant setting, upscale, good service, and with more food artistically displayed on the buffet tables than could possibly be sampled in one two-hour period. All of the girls were present (San Francisco, Boston, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and one still

at home), four boyfriends, my wife and her mother and husband. Everyone seemed to enjoy it. I enjoyed it, and I paid for it.

I was in charge of my own birthday destiny. Well, sort of.