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Thanksgiving doesn't have to be the only time families get together. We should let this special day be a model for year-round dining.

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Meals can share more than food

By Tom Ohling

Special writer, *The Oregonian*

"Never forget that your family is really the most important assembly you ever entertain."

- Irma S. Rombauer, "Joy of Cooking."

Next week, people all over the country will sit down together to celebrate Thanksgiving.

But, what about the rest of the year?

Mealtime plays an important role in our daily lives. After all, the word "companion" is rooted in Latin and French words meaning "those who break bread together."

When I was growing up, my family didn't vacation together, play sports together, belong to clubs together. But we dined together nightly for the 18 years I spent at home.

Mother's call of "Everybody wash your hands" rang through the house like a dinner bell, and within minutes my father, grandmother, sister and sometimes a neighborhood friend and I would be seated in the kitchen.

Mother served up heated platters, steaming bowls, covered casseroles as she described the menu makings. But when I look back on those days, it was the nurturing conversation and the closeness that mean the most to me.

Meals were the meat and potatoes of family.

Every subject could be brought to the table; nothing was taboo. My father and I would fight the war, battle over Nixon and sometimes shout the relative merits of Benny Goodman vs. Jimi Hendrix.

Dinner was also a time to learn.

We shared information about friends and were quizzed about school. Father's work, the clothes mother was making or grandmother mending, household chores and "family matters" were the backdrop against which we children learned table manners, conversational skills, civility.

Plates empty, appetites sated, we would return to our individual lives. But, for at least one

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hour each evening, we were a family.

Communal dining is an important element of who we are. Animals eat: humans dine.

Answering this fundamental need by sharing food is a necessary component of civilization.

Religious and cultural traditions often find root in ritual meals, from ancient harvest bacchanalia to tea ceremonies, Thanksgiving, Seder, the saying of grace and Christian communion.

We intuitively understand a meal's healing power. A common response to ill, troubled or grieving neighbors is the proffered pie or warm casserole.

The importance of family dining cannot be overemphasized. People looking for ways to keep the family together can find an answer in mealtime.

In a society of single-parent households, two-parent-working families and soccer moms, we often hear the cry of "We just don't have enough time together."

Not that difficult

If we can keep business appointments, never miss a game and always make it to the hairdresser, there can be little excuse for not finding time to do the one thing that we all need to do -- eat -- and to do it together.

Fast food does not have to mean rushed or incomplete meals. In fact, the amount of prepared and pre-packaged foods available at restaurants and supermarkets can make it easier for us to take the time to dine together.

While politicians rant about the crisis in education, we can turn to our family table for answers.

A Reader's Digest survey shows the 60 percent of children who eat at least four family meals per week (out of 21 possible, if you count three meals a day) have higher test

scores.

Scientists, too, are weighing in on the side of better meals. They have long understood the importance of diet on healthy bodies. But now, good meals are understood to be crucial to cognitive development. Educators have found a relationship between shared family meals and a reduction in risky behavior in schools.

Talk shows and bookstore shelves are filled with discussions of dietary and stress problems. Mealtime offers a prescription. Recent studies have shown that people who eat meals in the company of others eat more nutritiously. Sharing meals with others also has a calming effect on the nervous system.

It isn't just he sitting down to the meal that is rewarding, but the preparation, too.

I find the planning and preparation of meals relaxing. My mind wanders and my nerves unwind while I'm slicing potatoes, dicing onions and browning the stew.

Sharing meals defines us

I look forward to the coming holidays.

Friends will gather often and we will share stories, argue politics, discuss fashion and cultivate ideas. The sharing of meals defines who and what my extended family is.

Thanksgiving doesn't have to be the only time families get together. We should let this special day be a model for year-round dining. If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, the way to a family's heart and soul is through mealtime. We can all give thanks for that.

And when we sit down together, sharing the joys of the holidays, I will say a personal thanks for the meals that are my family's tradition and foundation.