

Living Well in the Shadow of Life

What do you put in your toll house cookies?



Aunt Betty & Uncle Tony



Dad & Mom

Many of my favorite Christmas memories involve traditions, but there was one that repeated itself year after year as if I was in the movie *Groundhog Day*.

As a kid, I would get up early and “rip” the paper off the Christmas gifts. I think we could do it in record time. Today, our family tradition is that each person opens one gift, one person at a time. But back then, we looked at our pile of “loot” and would ooh and aah at the toys we received. It was always special. I started to play with my toys when my mother announced I had to get dressed; my grandmother, two aunts and uncle were coming over to the house.

They always came over at the same time on Christmas Day – 10am. In fact, they sat at the same place at the kitchen table each year. My mother would break out her butter cookies, Italian love knots and famous toll house cookies. As she poured the coffee, my uncle Tony grabbed a toll house cookie and ate it. He’d turn to my mother and say, “*Jo – these cookies are really good. What do you do that’s different?*” Betty’s cookies always came out flat”. (She was his wife and my aunt). My mother asked her, “*Betty*

– what do you use in your cookies – butter or Crisco?” Aunt Betty always replied “*butter*”. “*That’s the problem,*” my mother said, “*You need to use Crisco.*” They all agreed next year’s Christmas cookies would be made with Crisco.

Next year, I got up early, ripped through the paper to open the gifts. I counted the toys to be sure I got more than my sisters. As I started playing with them my mother said, “*Get dressed, your grandmother and aunts and uncle will soon be here*”. The cookies came out, the coffee was poured, my uncle grabbed a toll house cookie and asked my mother the same question he did last year. My mother asked my aunt if she used butter or Crisco to which my aunt said butter. Having recognized the problem, all agreed that Crisco would be used in next year’s Christmas cookies.

Next year, got up later (I’m getting older). Less toys, more clothes. Didn’t count toys. Still had to get dressed because the family was coming over. Same pot of coffee. Same Christmas cookies. Same questions. Same answers. Same group resolution to the problem.

This went on for at least 15 years. One year I informed my parents about the annual Christmas conversation. My father thought I was nuts, but when he saw it happen in front of him, he just rolled with laughter.

Why is food important? It brings people together to make great memories. Who really cares whether you put butter or Crisco in the annual toll house cookies? My aunt never got it right. She always used butter. I’m glad. It gave us something to talk about even to this day.

Food is an excuse to bring people together. My favorite thing to do is gather my family around the dinner table, tell stories and laugh. Do we get loud? Yes. Do we all speak at once? Of course we do, we’re Italian. The food brings us together in a way that nothing else can accomplish.

Rev. Tony Marciano is the Executive Director of the Charlotte Rescue Mission. The Charlotte Rescue Mission provides a free long term Christian recovery program for men and women who are addicted to drugs and alcohol. For more information, visit our website at www.charlotterescuemission.org.