



The Family Orange

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I love looking at the fresh produce at the grocery store. Often I have been enticed by large, beautiful oranges and then am disappointed to find that what I have purchased is mostly peel! You can't eat the peel but it does serve to protect the fruit that lives inside of it. Sometimes it is juicy and nutritious. Sometimes it is small or rotten.

Families can be like oranges. Each of us was raised in an environment surrounded by boundaries or peels that separate us from the world. Often, the thicker the peel, the more dysfunction in the family unit. I don't really like the word dysfunction but, if broken down, it means "dys" or disease of the way that the family operates or "functions".

When there are problems within the family unit such as addictions or incest, thick boundaries prevent the outside world from interfering. Those who are inside the orange are sometimes taught not to feel or talk about problems and that everything outside the peel is the enemy. In some cultures or families, those who leave the inside are shunned.

When two people start a new relationship, they bring what they know from their family orange with them. It is their "normal" and often they don't talk about things that they have accepted from infancy and don't understand what went on in the other person's orange. If their experiences were healthy and happy, they might want to drag the other person into their family orange. If they were unhealthy and unhappy, they might view the new relationship as an escape.

Special events such as Christmas can cause friction in families, especially when those in the original oranges think that new partners need to become part of their orange. I have seen clients dread the holidays as they feel they are expected (or demanded) to attend several meals, honour traditions that are unfamiliar and satisfy others without question. Adults can be expected to sleep on the floor with their children rather than book a hotel room just because "someone" thinks they need to all wake up in the same location on December 25th. Some people are harassed if they are unable to unwilling to drive hours and hours for a planned celebration.

One of the most difficult but important things for a new relationship is for them to create their own orange which honours their shared values. This requires good communications and healthy boundaries. The peel needs to be thick enough to protect their relationship (and children if there are any) while being thin enough to allow interaction with the rest of the world. New traditions can be made and rather than have extended family members dictate what will happen, the couple will make joint decisions that they can both stand for.

Now that we are on the threshold of the Christmas season, it is time to consider all of those involved. Just because you have always done things a certain way doesn't mean that this will or should continue. Would you rather have it "your way" and cause strife or will you consider that time changes things and others have needs to be considered?

Take out a pen and paper right now. Draw circles to represent the "oranges" of different family members who you care about. Make sure that you draw a separate circle for each single adult and each partnership rather than trying to drag them into your circle. Achieving peace on earth this Christmas begins with your efforts to honour the needs of those on the page.

If you want to enjoy time with them, try offering an invitation rather than making a demand because of your expectations.

Perhaps it is time for you to make some new traditions. It's all part of the Christmas preparation!