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**Capitol View**

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**Whatever Happened to Family Dinner?**

Thanksgiving, Christmas, maybe Easter. Birthdays, anniversaries, funerals. We got together just as much for the camaraderie as for the chuck roast. We called it family dinner.

It was a time to sit down, face--to-face, and remember. Remember who we are and where we came from and how we got here. It was a time to plan and discuss where we are going. But we don't do it anymore. Too busy with our lives and work, commitments, and obligations, too many excuses. Too much procrastination.

As a kid, I remember Sundays after church at Grandma's house. The siblings, their spouses and kids, would gather together. Beyond the food, the fellowship would drain the afternoon. But family dinners aren’t happening a lot these days.

Now we watch the Reagan family gathering on a TV cop show and envy what that represents. Some of the best lines out of actor Tom Selleck's mouth come during those dinners.

I don't want to lay another national cultural crisis at your feet, but apparently, I'm not the only one who has been thinking about it. Researchers on both coasts, at Stanford University and Harvard, have sponsored projects called family dinner. There’s even a TV show by that name.

Longtime fans of *Blue Bloods* know that the Reagan family dinners are one of the most critical aspects of the entire series, occurring at least once every episode. These infamous family dinners gather the Reagan dynasty to laugh together, discuss their work, and preserve a bit of normalcy in their hectic and dangerous lives.

Returning to the family home every week makes the characters feel more like real people. Imagine your passionate uncle with an opinion on nearly everything. Or your seemingly strait-laced grandpa with his wry sense of humor. That’s why the Sunday dinner scenes have become the heart of the show.

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The Family Dinner Project at Stanford University suggests that for many parents it would be much easier and simpler to forget about family dinners. Jobs, children, and after-school activities all contribute to families being constantly on the go, fueling the need to eat on the run.

But more and more parents are realizing the importance of shared family time at the dinner table, often the only time when all family members are together in one place. Some view family dinners as another burdensome chore at the end of a tiring day, more are realizing that sharing time at day's end is important.

The report indicates the purpose of family dinner may differ from family to family: In one family, good table manners might be the most important thing parents want to teach; in another, it might be communicating with one another, learning how to listen, and learning to respect each other. Pay attention, we can all learn from that one.

For his TV show *Family Dinner,* celebrity chef and restaurateur Andrew Zimmern visits families across America to explore how the cultural, regional, and historical facets of who we are inform what and how we eat, and the way food brings people together. He said it is at these dinners that some of the most difficult conversations also occur.

The Harvard University study concludes that over the past 20 years, research has shown what parents have known for a long time: sharing a fun family meal is good for the spirit, brain and health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family meals with the kinds of behaviors that parents want for their children: higher grade-point averages, resilience, and self-esteem. Those sound like win-win scenarios to me.

So, as you gather for Thanksgiving, be it with close or extended family, consider this to be a reboot of the old family dinner tradition. That favorite uncle or grandpa might not be around anymore, but you can learn to love some new ones.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.