

“TEA FOR TWO” AND THE REST OF THE SCHOOL: VALENTINE’S DAY AT ADAMS ELEMENTARY

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I have fond memories of creating valentines with my mother and then going out in the cover of night to place my love creations on family and friend’s doorsteps, ring the bell, and hide in a nearby shrub to watch my “valentine” retrieve my heartfelt declarations. Why? That’s the way we celebrated Valentine’s Day in our family, our town. To me, Valentine celebrations have always been an adventure. That must be why when my oldest daughter (now 23) came home from first grade at Adams Elementary in Logan, Utah, with an invitation from the PTA to the school’s Valentine’s Tea my heart went pit a pat. But what exactly was a Valentine’s Tea? In keeping with the grand motherhood tradition, I asked my neighbor. I learned that the tea is a big affair at Adams, hosted by the school and the PTA in celebration of not only Valentine’s Day, but much more.

Posters and banners with symbols of love, cooperation, respect, manners, and friendship herald the event throughout the school. Although school days leading up to the event are filled with normal school activities, there is much excitement. And on the day of the tea, which is 14 February, or the closest school day to the 14th, students do exchange Valentines with their classmates, but it is the tea that holds their attention.

The event is held in the school’s media center, elaborately decorated with balloons and crepe paper, with an arched white lattice entryway festooned with pink, red, and white marking the tea space. The table decorations reflect the theme (which is different each year), often hand made by PTA moms and sold later to help with the cost of the tea.

After the general invitations are distributed by the PTA, a buzz goes throughout the school. Children giggle and whisper about who they will “go with” to the tea and how they will select their partner, what they will wear, and what kind of entertainment there will be. Some years as the tea approaches, PTA members or older brothers and sisters visit classrooms and act out situations on manners: what to do when seating a person at a table, how to talk politely with your partner, simple table manners, listening skills, appropriate “tea” voice level, etc. Of this Mrs. Spuhler, who taught at Adams when the event started, explained:

In our classrooms, we did a lot of activities about manners for the 2 or 3 weeks before the tea was held. [Like] how to use napkins, have the boys even practice holding the chair for the girls. Play games with people who said nice words. All

kinds of things like that. Just using good manners. . . And it was just a really neat time. . . I think it makes the children more aware, especially with the manners teaching, of other people in the school and little more respect for other people. . . I think the whole school benefited from it. Because of it, I think, there was a lot of love. The children felt closer to one another on that day. They had respect for one another, kind words were used, and sometimes those would go on for quite a while. (L. Spuhler, interview with R. Williams, 15 March 2001, Providence UT).

Judy Greene, long time 5th grade teacher at Adams and now an instructor at Utah State University's Elementary Education Department, stated about manner education:

We'd talk about how you're going to go with someone, and it doesn't mean a date. You're just escorting a young lady or you're being escorted by your man to go to the tea. And what you talk about and how you sit . . .

I had two favorite books. One was called, *Manners are Fun*. It's just basic good manners. And then I found another one about manners, and it was like old fashioned manners. *Ma'am and Manners* by Ruth Cowler. And it's all about etiquette and the Golden Rule. And I've shared these and showed them to the children (J. Greene, interview, R. Williams, 23 March 2001, Utah State University, Logan UT).

The manner instruction, posters, and PTA invitations are all part of the adult Valentine's Tea education. There is, of course, the children's (folk) education: the stories! Like all rites of passage, the Valentine's Tea has initiation processes. Older students, functioning as wise tradition bearers, reminisce with each other and with younger children (the novitiates) about past teas, especially stories about who they "went with." Younger children are taught the rules of the tea by older students and siblings, so by the day the event arrives students are primed on how to act and what to do. Thomas (who attended Adams from 1993-1999) recalls: "I have two older sisters who I watched go to the tea when I was little, so when I got to Adams I kind of knew what to expect. But I was still a little nervous my kindergarten year, especially since Valentine's Day is my birthday" (T. Williams, phone interview with R. Williams, 17 October 2005).

Although younger students learn the ropes of the tea from older siblings and students, the event is uniquely experienced by each student.

Kaitie (who attended Adams from 1991-1997) recalls: "I never truly loved it [the tea] but I did not hate it there because it allowed me to get out of class! I got my picture in the paper" (from "Remember Adams Elementary's Valentine Tea?" Questionnaire, May 2001). And JD (also at Adams from 1991-1997) recalls: "In third grade I really wanted to go with a certain girl and I got to go with her. In 4th grade it snowed really hard that day [tea day] and school was cancelled. The next day I didn't wear my Sunday best and I was embarrassed [because we had the tea on that day] (Questionnaire, 2001). And Sadie (who attended Adams 1990-1996) said: "I loved to hate it. I remember all my friends and I always complaining." When she was asked if she would like her children to participate in a Valentine's Tea, she said "Yes! It is good, clean fun!" Kaitie said of that question: "Sure, why not, just as long as things don't get too out of hand. Just Kidding. It was an experience I never forgot and it was fun" (Questionnaire, 2001).

Along with hearing from older students about what to expect (with occasional exaggeration that is meant to scare/test the younger children-like initiations do), partners have to be selected. This process varies from classroom to classroom, teacher to teacher, and year to year. In the first years of the tea, children didn't partner, going as a class. However, early on mixed-gendered partnering began, with teachers' assigning or helping the children choose partners. The earliest partner selection method was drawing names out of a hat on the day of the tea or cutting hearts in half and having a boy or girl take one side of a heart and finding the person who had the other half of their heart for their partner. These methods are still used in some classrooms; but today many educators use more unique methods. One teacher has the young men in the class pick a young lady's name from a slip of paper and then call her on the phone, asking her to accompany him to the tea. The young lady responds over the phone. Some classes use personal written invitations to ask and to answer.

However, in recent years, students have also participated in more elaborate pairing activities that model the creative asking and answering activities of local high school students' proms. To this end, some teachers have their students select partners by having all the girls take off one shoe and the boys each choosing a shoe. The young lady who has the mate (Cinderella-like) is the young man's partner. Other teachers have all the girls in their class choose a candy bar, all the boys in class (in a separate room, of course) choose a candy bar, and when they reassemble in the classroom, the boys pair with the girls who have the same sweet.

The choosing of a partner or pairing on Valentine's Day is a longstanding tradition. Some believe that on the eve of Lupercalia (a Roman rite of fertility performed over 2,000 years ago by shepherd folk) young men would draw the names of the girls who would be their dance

partners for the celebration. Another tradition holds that in France's Vosges Mountain region the elders would divide the youth into two groups: one had the names of young women who wished to marry, the other had a list of young men. The elders would line up at the window of houses along narrow street and take turns calling out the names of the youths. The couples would then meet and see if they liked each other. If they did the woman would prepare a meal which the couple would share. Then the pair would attend a Valentine's dance together.

Although the children at Adams Elementary are not "pairing" for a long term relationship, they are pairing in a reflection of both long standing Valentine's day traditions and the communities' pairing attitudes. Sue Sorenson, Principal at Ellis Elementary now (also in Logan, Utah) but 4th grade teacher at Adams Elementary for 19 years states:

Generally the focus [of the tea] has been on manners so that they are using it as a way to promote good manners, where we wear our best clothes and are on our best behavior. Traditionally at Adams everybody has been paired up with someone to go to the tea with. Now, that is not necessarily the case here [at Ellis Elementary]. . . But when I was at Adams, it was the manners and then we would always pair someone up with the tea and [have] a little mini-manner theme. The boys would pull the chairs out, the girls would sit down. Some years I'd have them sit by the person they went to the tea with and some years I'd let them sit wherever they wanted. Depends on what kind of group I had, and if I thought they could be nice to each other or not (S. Sorenson interview with R. Williams, 20 February 2001, Logan UT).

Because the tea day is so busy, teachers sign up for 20 minute tea times—pun intended—for their class to attend the event, two classrooms at a time. At the appointed time, the children, all decked out in their finery, with boy/girl partners on each other's arm, promenade from their classroom to the media center with other children peeking from classroom's to watch.

Once the children are in the media center each pair (which can include three children if the boy/girl ration is not exact) pass through the arch into the party. As the children enter, parents stand just inside the tea area snapping pictures and taking videos of their children. Amidst the giggles, younger children look a bit wistful like they are part of a fairy play, mid-aged students often act "grossed-out" at having to touch, if only the arm, of the opposite sex, while fifth graders, the oldest at the school, express a combination of youthful boredom and near-teen delight. The parents coo and laugh and talk with teachers and other parents as the children march by with the sounds of music filling the air. When possible, music is provided

by Logan High School or Mt. Logan Middle School orchestra students, all alumni of Adams Elementary—who began their orchestra experience in 4th grade at Adams. When this isn't an option, a boom box and CDs provide the music.

The event is a community day. Once the children are inside the officially marked “tea” area, the young men seat their guest(s) and then themselves and wait for the PTA members to serve the treat. The children sit, visit, eat and are photographed (again) for about 10 minutes and then, when their politeness is stretched to the limit, they are excused from the table and return to their classrooms where many teachers visit with their classes about the experience, sharing examples of previous years, and learning what the kids thought of their “tea” experience. In fact one fourth grade teacher has all her students write a paragraph or two about their Valentine’s Social [as the event is now called] experience and binds them all together for each student, including a picture of the student and his/her partner on the cover.

Why the name change you might wonder? I asked Kelli Stack, PTA mom and co-chair of the event in 1998; she said:

It was the Valentine’s Tea before [we hosted the event] and we just did the Valentine’s Social—just cause they were not really having tea or anything and it was just more a social thing (K. Stack interview with Randy Williams, 19 March 2001, Providence UT).

Thus, with all that is constant about the tea (date— or close to it— manner education, treat, parent/educator involvement), there is variation. The name is only one change. Over the years each Valentine’s Tea chair (or co-chairpersons) has added her touch with activities coming and going with some to come back again, depending on the PTA board, school, parents, and community folkways.

Martin, a fourth grader at Adams in 2001 summed up the day this way:

I went with Mataya and James to the Valentine’s Social. It is in the Library each year. The Valentine’s Social is a party that the school PTA organizes every Valentine’s Day. We drink punch, eat cookies and practice our manners. I wore my best clothes. The PTA gave us cookies and 7-Up. I don’t like 7-Up at all. I got my partner by choosing a candy bar. We went at 10:10 a.m. I was scared. I chose a Crunch bar. At the end of the day we passed out Valentines. My favorite was Kodey’s Valentine, it was a heart bean bag. It was red, it had a black smile and eyes that rolled around (from 2000-2001 *Valentine’s Social*, Laura Stewart teacher, Adams Elementary).

Why a Valentine's Tea? Why not just exchange Valentine cards and goodies and be done with it? Well, Adams School, which was built in 1937, did celebrate Valentine's Day that way. In fact, for many years the big event in February was a Founder's Day celebration. But things change with the times, and on 10 February 1966 a Valentine's Tea was held under the direction of the PTA. The school administration and the PTA decided it was time for the students at Adams to learn to be more civil and mannerly. The first Valentine's Tea was held in the auditorium for all the children (no separate "tea" times) with punch and cupcakes served by the PTA. This year's Valentine's Social is slated for 14 February 2006 and marks the 40th celebration.

The tea's appearance in 1966 came at the time of great social change. The heightened celebration of Valentine's Day (eventually totally replacing the founder's day celebration), with a parent-hosted and school sanctioned rite of passage focusing on civility, reflected the parents' and educators' desire to teach and reinforce local social manners, model the communities mores and customs, and bring parents, teachers, and students together in a celebration of "love" and control.

In the minutes from the February 1976 Adams Elementary PTA meeting we learn:

The Valentine Tea is a very special occasion of the year. It is a tradition that everyone looks forward to. The children as well as the Room Representatives and PTA officers have a very enjoyable afternoon. The Valentine Tea requires a lot of time and effort on the part of the chairmen. We spent many hours making plans, arrangements, and making decorations for it. The PTA likes to provide a formal affair for the children where they can enjoy themselves as well as use their very best manners (Adams Elementary PTA minutes, housed at Adams Elementary).

The Valentine's Tea is a life cycle event. Although each culture defines the cycle of life in a variety of ways, in the United States we often think of ourselves passing through four general phases: childhood (from birth to ten years old), adolescence (from ten to twenty-one), adulthood (from twenty-one through sixty-five) and senior (from sixty-five onward). It is in our most intimate groupings that we learn how to negotiate the life cycle with folk customs that aid a person's progress through the cycle, marking with ritual and ceremony the key points a person moves through. The elementary school years (hence the name), whether public, parochial, private, home or other, are a time that children learn their communities' (family, ethnic, religious, regional, etc.) cultural norms, attitudes, heritage, etc., which they then use as a guide through their lives. Thus, we experience human transitions from birth through puberty through adulthood through

death by virtue of being human in our “groups.” As members of a group we experience and interpret those transitions in a variety of ways which delineate both the ways in which we are different as well as the ways in which we are similar. Some of these passages are marked by specialized rituals: rites of passage. Regardless of culture, these rites are marked by a three-part sequence outlined by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*, in which the group member experiences temporary separation from society, a liminal phase of betwixt and between, and a reincorporation into the society with new status (1961). For students at Adams Elementary, the tea day is definitely a liminal day.

All people start at the same place on the life cycle: birth. As individuals progress through childhood they are initiated into the society—and that is exactly what happens at Adams Elementary’s Valentine’s Tea. And, as an individual moves through the life cycle satisfactorily he/she becomes, usually by virtue of age and appropriate behavior, a full member of the society. At Adams we see parents and teachers (and older students or siblings that “teach” on an even more intimate level) the folkways of the group to the young. And, as an individual ages and more fully understands the mores of the society (folk group), he/she is elevated to a new status of sage: keeper of group knowledge and customs; thus, remembering for the group the full circle of the life cycle. At Adams the sages are the long-term teachers, PTA parents who are longstanding participants at the school, and for this event again, older students who also remember for the young. This folk learning serves to perpetuate the values, goals, taboos, fears of the group.

Laura Stewart, a fifth grade teacher at Adams Elementary for many years said of the event:

Personally, I really like the Valentine’s Social. . . because it’s something that the kids can get excited about and even though they say they don’t want to go, they all do. They love it. And it just helps enforce manners, and how to be polite. I think it is great. . . . [Regarding the parents’ participation] The parents love the Valentine Social and they all want to get that day off work, if they work. The want to come and be with their kids. . . I haven’t ever heard any parents be concerned about it. And kids if they are from other countries or other cultures [they] enjoy doing this as part of our culture here. [Regarding the continuation of social] I think it will continue because the parents are so strong behind it (L. Stewart interview by R. Williams, 20 February 2001, Logan UT).

The Valentine’s Tea is a time for the community—school, friends, parents, and some grandparents. However, the community of Adams Elementary is changing from a predominately homogenous, Anglo-Mormon

demographic to a community of greater ethnic and religious diversity, including international students and parents, as many adults attend Utah State University. Yet, the Valentine Tea/Social, with its focus on good manners, civility, sociability, and mix-gendered pairing continues, continues to reflect the value systems of most of the parents/community members and therefore continues to be a central ritual at the school.

As Laura Stewart stated, parents of most children take the time-slot of their children's "tea time" off from work or home activities to come and watch their children promenade and experience the tea while visiting with other parents, teachers, and the principal. The event truly does unite the children and the parents for this one day.

The Tea was in some ways a precursor for another local dating ritual: the elaborate asking/answering for prom dates. In Cache Valley (where Adams Elementary is situated) the high school students have a long standing tradition (about 20 years) of asking for dates to major school dances in a most elaborate way. This dating ritual involves parents and friends in the asking and answering for/of prom dates where both boys and girls do the asking. Thus, greatly alleviating the fear of rejection. As well, on the prom date, youths group date (like at the tea), going with 2-20 couples.

I believe, in Cache Valley, Utah, this high school tradition had its beginnings in the student's elementary school, with safe, well supervised mixed-gendered interaction that moved forward with them to high school dances where they had "tea for two" and the rest of the school, reinforcing family/religious rituals (like *quinceañeras* and wedding receptions) which all reflect what they learned in kindergarten at the Valentine's Tea.

On Valentine's Day Adams students and educators step into a liminal space and share a time-of-out-time from the ordinary school routine of lessons and healthy food in exchange for fancy dress, goodies, gifting (cards and small treats), and limited school work that day in an effort to present the communities' folkways. Although the school's celebration does include the popular culture expectation of store bought Valentine cards and goodies, the communities' traditions are presented and modeled for children as well.

And, it is more than just than manners and polite conversation that is being perpetuated. For instance, although there are often men on the PTA board (especially in the early years), I have found no record where a man acted as the Valentine's Tea chair or co-chair, thus modeling, perhaps, another community trait for the children. When I asked some Adams alumni if they would host a tea at their children's school, all the girls said yes and all the boys said no.

This longstanding rite of passage gives parents and educators an opportunity to highlight community ideals, in a safe, mostly fun

environment. And, although not all children or parents will choose the lifestyle presented by the school/community on this day, the largeness of the group and the desired inclusion of all the students, teachers, and parents, makes the event truly communal.