

Gather Near

*“Through the years we all will be together, if the Fates allow. . . .”**

This holiday season the politicians in Washington, and warring factions everywhere, should take a tip from my New England family and sit down together over a big pot of seafood chowder. I don't know why—maybe it's the hot creamy broth, maybe it's the shared promise of lobster bits hiding at the bottom of each bowl—but when there's chowder, differences seem to fall away.

When I was growing up, the annual Chowder Party was the night when family and friends came together, usually Christmas Eve, to celebrate their unspoken bond. My grandmother Annie started the tradition during the Depression, when fish was cheaper than meat, and the job of feeding a crowd took extra creativity. By the time prosperity returned, the event had taken hold. After Annie died the party moved to my parents' house, and my father made the chowder.

My Aunt Barbara and he would take turns at the stove, seldom stirring (lest the haddock crumble), just checking the pot for tiny bubbles on the surface (the signal to lower the heat so the cream wouldn't curdle). The rest of the year, whenever they got together Barbara the Republican would shake her finger at my father the Democrat. Their arguments were legendary—but not at the Chowder Party. This one night, dressed in their best, they always seemed to call a truce.

All of us understood: Tonight we are one. Jeremy the Shakespearean scholar would find common ground with my father's cousin Charlie, who worked at the tannery and smoked cigars. Even my grandfather Frank, who had once famously punched a man in the jaw in front of Daeris' Tea Room, would be on his best behavior. At the Chowder Party everyone got along.

Today most of these people are gone, all the elders but also Jeremy, who died of AIDS at age 40. Like all families we have our losses, our changes, so it's nice when something good endures. My brother makes the chowder now, and everyone gathers at his daughter's house. Someone still has to watch the pot for bubbles. The kids still run around collecting extra chairs for the table. Someone says grace and, later, someone always announces: “That was the best chowder we ever had.” Most importantly, the rooms overflow with conviviality, forbearance, friendship and love, all as keenly sensed as the warmth and aroma of a certain special dish.

So, I recommend it. In fact, join us. Annie always set an extra place, not just this one night but year round, in case somebody dropped by. As we were then, so we are now, faithful friends, all in this together.

That's the spirit. Let your heart be light. Have yourself another cup of chowder, and maybe, just maybe, all our troubles really will be out of sight. ([Here's the recipe.](#))

© 2013 Gail Terry Grimes

* Lyrics excerpted from “*Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*” by Ralph Blane.