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Tracy Begland: Don't stress about the perfect plan

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A fortune cookie contains not advice, but a question. A spray-painted message fills a prominent hill that hundreds see daily. A soccer team, each player with a single letter on his t-shirt, suddenly turns toward the stands. To ask that special someone to make a commitment. Not for a lifetime, but for one night. "Will you be my date for prom?"

High school upperclassmen devise and execute strategies to secure a prom date. But typically the girls and their moms take over the planning for that magical night. They expect a fairy tale evening. But what if prom is not the crowning social glory of a high school career?

We might label these teens and their moms as overdramatic. We could scoff at the time and energy they sink into planning the evening. We might even raise our eyebrows at the money they spend.

Before we do, though, we should take an honest look at our own "big" events: parties, barbecues and family vacations. We see signs of over-planning everywhere in our culture.

We might be extreme planners if we have ever:

- Insisted on "homemade" when ready-made is available and affordable.
- Emptied the local grocery to fill our refrigerator and freezer with everyone's favorite food and drinks.
- Planted, raked and groomed our backyard into a veritable Garden of Eden.
- Checked the radar and then prayed that a flashing red line of storms stretching from Oklahoma City to San Antonio would disappear before reaching our newly created Eden. (After hosting four rainy parties in June, I can assure you these prayers are futile.)
- Suddenly noticed gray hairs or dark roots that required an emergency salon appointment.
- Swore we would lose 10 pounds before the big event.
- Spent more than half a day shopping for that perfect outfit; more than a day if we couldn't lose the aforementioned 10 pounds.
- Developed minute-by-minute vacation itineraries that would make a travel agent jealous. I prided myself on my impeccable vacation planning until I booked a special weekend trip for my son and husband. They were quite disappointed at the airport that morning to discover I had booked a flight for 10 p.m. instead of 10 a.m.

Why do we do it? Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*, writes that "many of us spend time and

money for a few hours of celebration to actualize a fantasy." That might not be so bad except we "get stressed about perfectionism and things happening outside our control."

Mandel offers three suggestions to combat this:

- "Let go of perfectionism – there is no such thing."
- "Delegate tasks. Everyone wants to participate and belong."
- "Use humor to break bad moods and conflicts."

We are entering a season of big events. Half the fun is the planning and the anticipation. Hopes and dreams for the event inspire our schemes. But when the first strains of music begin, the first guest arrives, or our sandaled foot steps on a plane, the plotting phase is over.

Check your plans at the door. Experience the big event moment by moment as it unfolds. Enjoy the beautiful, the touching and the exhilarating. Relish the surprises – the funny ones and even the embarrassing ones. They provide the best stories and the most lasting memories.

No need for our celebrations to be dramas, epics or horror films. Instead, as Mandel suggests, view your event as a "sitcom." No need to add a laugh track. It will take care of itself.

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