

CHRISTMAS KEEPSAKES

Unpacking ornaments gives one mom a chance to slow down and savor her family's history—and pass it on to her son

My 8-year-old son, Eamon, dangles a two-inch lighthouse ornament from his fingers. “Tell me about our trip to Cape Cod with Gaga and Papa,” he says. We snuggle on the sofa and I remind him of how he convinced his 76-year-old grandfather to swing in a hammock with him.

“And do you remember that he bought you ice cream every day, sometimes twice a day, for a week?” I ask.

“Yep. And I fell down at the lighthouse and Papa carried me all the way back to the car!” He pauses, then says, “He’s the best.”

Instead of buying expensive souvenirs when we travel, our family buys a Christmas ornament to remind us of each destination. Eamon loves this tradition—it’s like embarking on a treasure hunt every time we go on vacation. Should we get a smiling Statue of Liberty? No, let’s keep looking. The Empire State Building? Nah. A shiny metal subway car for a boy who’s always loved trains? Perfect!

Even more special than the hunt, though, is the moment when we ceremoniously cart out our ornaments to decorate the tree each year. Of course we love our kid-made candy canes and salt-dough Santas. But it’s when we unwrap the seashell wreath ornament from our trip to the beach with the cousins or the tiny pewter moose from Vermont that we pause to retell and relive the memories from each of those trips, our family growing closer in the process.

“Remember that huge pillow fight we had in Vermont?” Eamon asks. “And how we couldn’t stop laughing?”

“You mean when you and your dad kept ganging up on me?” I ask him, both of us laughing now.

Because my husband, Bryan, and I started this tradition before our son was born, it’s a wonderful way to share our family history with him. Eamon loves to unwrap the colorful mask ornament from Puerto Rico and ask us to recount details of how we swam in a bioluminescent bay (“Tell me again how the water glowed all around you”). He’ll pick up the red and green trolley ornament we bought on our honeymoon in San Francisco and announce, “If I had been there, you would have had an even better time!”

We started this tradition as a way of documenting our travels—and inexpensively decorating our tree. But now I see that



it’s turned into a ritual that helps teach my son that he’s part of something larger than himself. I’ve also realized that it’s helping me too: Each time Eamon asks for a story (“Tell me more about visiting Aunt Hallie in Virginia”), I’m given the chance to slow down and recall memories and details I might have otherwise forgotten (like walking hand in hand with my young niece down the streets of Colonial Williamsburg). I’ve never been great about keeping scrapbooks, and we lead the typical busy lives of most families, not always taking the time to sit and look at the photos we take. But while we’re decorating the tree, we have a rare opportunity to savor our memories.

Each Christmas I make a special effort to surprise Eamon by telling a few new tales along with our old favorites. Last year, I pointed out an ornament of a church. “You already know your dad and I got married in an all-glass chapel in the woods,” I said. “But have I told you that in the middle of the ceremony, he made me laugh by pointing out some squirrels playing behind the minister?”

Eamon smiled and said, “I think I want to get married there too.”

It brings me comfort to know this story will now be told and retold, that one day Eamon will share our family experiences with his children as well—and that just as our ornaments and the memories they represent belong to us, we also belong to one another.