

PERSONAL BEST

"I heard the sound of heavenly thunder."—ANNE MARIE RICCITELLI, P. 61

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My Holiday Ritual

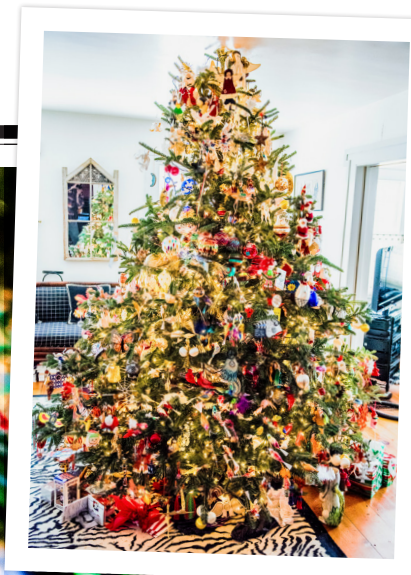
The Loyal Tannenbaum

For retail design director Bonnie Mackay, a Christmas tree was life's only certainty

WHEN I WAS small, on every Christmas Eve my father put up the lights on our tree and my mother created a story with her ornaments. Daddy was a ventriloquist, so he made them all talk to me.

I was 9 when he died. The following Christmas I was living with my grandmother, aunt and uncle; my mother was working in another town, as a teacher. My world seemed upside down, but my aunt's beautiful tree comforted me. Each ornament was part of my heritage. I realized Christmas trees were the continuity in my life, and I decided I'd always have one.

Before we got married, my husband, Bob, gave me the best gift ever—a real tree and 70 red, gold and white silk balls. Over the years, that has grown to a collection of 3,000 ornaments. The oldest is my grandfather's carrot. It's 115 years old, made of very fine gauze and cotton. It was a puppet prototype: He was a vaudevillian and educator whose puppets encouraged children to eat healthy. My grandmother's



Among Mackay's keepsakes is a stand bearing glass Santa ornaments, some cast from the same German mold.

St. Nicholas ornament is nearly as old. And I have the first ornament my parents bought together, a gingerbread man from 1949.

People give me ornaments that represent themselves—or me. There's a tiny Raggedy Andy from my friend Kimble, who helped my Jewish roommate and me decorate what we called the Tree of Disarray. We used jewelry and cups and saucers as decorations.

Trimming takes four to five days. I have to study the tree first, because each has a different structure and personality. Then I unpack the ornaments, arrange them in categories and slowly choose the ones I need. Each year ornaments come and go: I break some, I give some away, some get lost, and people give me new ones. So I have to decorate the tree differently each time, looking at the individual ornaments

and saying, "Sorry, I can't place you here this year." Sometimes I feel like they're screaming back, "Why? I liked it there!"

When the tree is finished, Bob and I have a party for our families, then our friends. Everyone has favorite ornaments they look for. It's wonderful; the tree connects us all and reminds us of our relationships.

The longest I've kept a tree was in 2002. That March 10, my mother died, and I just couldn't take it down—her ornaments were on it. The most amazing thing happened: The tree stayed perfectly green for another three weeks! Finally, one angel at the top started spinning. My mother was telling me I could take down the tree. —As told to Gene Santoro

Merchandising expert Bonnie Mackay, 67, lives in Brooklyn Heights and upstate New York. She is the author of the illustrated memoir Tree of Treasures: A Life in Ornaments.

