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The Past, Present & Future of Thanksgiving

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This year's Thanksgiving is being heralded as the 400th anniversary of the first pilgrim Thanksgiving in 1621. Last week, in anticipation of today's service, I jokingly mentioned that the Thanksgiving story many of us learned as children is 80% a lie. I have no idea what the actual percentage would work out to, but I was pointing to the fact that **growing up, many of us heard only a small slice of the truth of that story**, perhaps only 20%.

Without a fuller context, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Thanksgiving gives the mistaken impression that there is a 400-year unbroken tradition there to celebrate. The historical realities are a lot more complex. To learn more about the rest of the story, I would like to invite us all on a brief tour of the past, present—and potentially—the future of Thanksgiving.

As our primary guide, I will be drawing from an important book published a few years ago titled **This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving** by David Silverman, a history professor at George Washington University who specializes in Native American, Colonial American, and American racial history. I recommend his book highly if this sermon leaves you curious to learn more. Another helpful book that I will also be drawing from is *Thanksgiving: The Biography of an American Holiday* by James Baker (University Of New Hampshire Press, 2009).

To begin, if we turn the clock back 400 years to 1621, there apparently was a shared meal between some English colonists and some members of the Wampanoag Tribe, but **neither party thought of that event as a Thanksgiving**. At that time, the customary usage of the word "thanksgiving" was the opposite of today's cultural connotation of a celebratory feast; back then, a religious "thanksgiving" implied a *fast* day in which one refrained from eating, instead spending most of the day at church in solemn reflection and prayer (Silverman 4).

That's one major sense in which there is not a 400-year unbroken tradition of Thanksgiving. Instead, our contemporary understanding of the word "Thanksgiving"—and of today's holiday—was constructed over time due to a confluence of causes and conditions. It turns out that **throughout the 1700s and well into the first half of the 1800s, "Thanksgiving had no link whatsoever with Pilgrims and Indians."** It was also a day almost exclusively celebrated *regionally, mostly* in New England, and at a variety of different times in late November (Silverman 3-4; Baker 36).

The shift toward a Thanksgiving holiday more similar to the one we are familiar with today dates back only about a century and a half to the middle of the 1800s. And there were at least two major factors in shaping that contemporary Thanksgiving tradition.

The first factor was the standardization of an official date, initiated in 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday of November of that year as a "national day of Thanksgiving." His goal at the time was what he thought of as a one-time attempt to help "foster unity amid the horrors of the Civil War." He didn't intend to start an annual tradition. Nonetheless, this 1863 occasion helped start a trend among increasingly large portions of the country celebrating a Thanksgiving meal on the same date each year (Silverman 4; Baker 72).

The second significant factor in creating the Thanksgiving traditions that we know today can be traced back to a seed planted by one of our Unitarian forebears, The Rev. Andrew Young (1800-1854), the minister of a Unitarian congregation in Boston. Keep in mind what we noted earlier, that "No account of the Pilgrims published before the 1840s made any reference to either a Thanksgiving or a harvest celebration in 1621" (Baker 12)—an understanding that began to change in 1841 when Rev. Young

published a book titled *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers,* which included a footnote referring to the 1621 event as "The first Thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England" (Baker 13).

Slowly, after 1841 and through the second half of the nineteenth century, this new conception of that small gathering in 1621 as the origin of a proud new national day of feasting and gratitude became increasingly widespread (Baker 14-15). Eventually, most of the general public began to take it for granted that the holiday as they now knew the story had always been celebrated that way—for centuries (Silverman 5).

But that version of the story of "the first Thanksgiving" was a much-embellished one, which emphasized one particular White, northern, Protestant perspective—and almost completely neglected Indigenous points of view (Silverman 6-7).

It wasn't until the 1890s—little more than a century ago—that public school classrooms began to be filled each November with what we now think of as "traditional" Thanksgiving decorations—of generic pilgrims, generic Indians, corn, pumpkins, turkeys and more, all celebrating the theoretically friendly relationships between White settlers and the welcoming natives. Before the late nineteenth century and even into the early twentieth century, that sort of standardized Thanksgiving iconography was uncommon (Baker 115). Similarly, Thanksgiving parades date back only to the 1920s. And if we are honest about it, Thanksgiving parades are really much less about giving thanks and much more about businesses celebrating the beginning of the holiday shopping season (Baker 145).

The most important shift in telling a more accurate and balanced version of this moment in history happened in 1970, around the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Mayflower—the landing a year prior to the so-called first Thanksgiving.) In 1970, on that Mayflower landing anniversary, Frank James, a member of the Wampanoag Tribe started an Indigenous People's movement by unofficially renaming Thanksgiving Day a National Day of Mourning (Silverman 2).

The committee planning that 350th anniversary celebration had originally invited James to give a speech from an Indigenous People's point of view. But the speech James submitted for review in advance told difficult truths about both the ongoing

impacts of colonialism and current impoverished state of many Wampanoag people (Silverman 420). Although James's speech was generally viewed as both "historically accurate and fairly moderate in tone," it was rejected as "not laudatory enough for the committee" (Baker 186).

After being uninvited to the official celebration, Indigenous plans emerged in response, to hold a National Day of Mourning as a sort of counter-Thanksgiving Day. This first National Day of Mourning rally included Indigenous activists boarding the Mayflower II replica, tearing down the English flags, throwing sand on Plymouth Rock as a symbolic burial of the pilgrim's landing site, overturning tables at the official 350th-anniversary Thanksgiving dinner location, and carrying away the cooked turkeys (Baker 186). In retrospect, I suspect the committee wished they could go back and let James give his original fairly moderate remarks.

If you visit the town of Plymouth today, you'll find a plaque about the National Day of Mourning tradition that says:

> Since 1970, Native Americans have gathered at noon on Cole's Hill in Plymouth to commemorate a National Day of Mourning on the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday. Many Native Americans do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims and other European settlers. To them, Thanksgiving Day is a reminder of the genocide of millions of their people, the theft of their lands, and the relentless assault on their cultures. Participants in National Day of Mourning honor Native ancestors and the struggles of Native peoples to survive today. It is a day of remembrance and spiritual connection as well as a protest of the racism and oppression which Native Americans continue to experience. (Silverman 426)

As we approach the 400th anniversary of the first Thanksgiving—with a big ol' asterisk for all the caveats and complexities we've been exploring—it is important to consider that this year is also the fifty-first anniversary of the National Day of Mourning.

So, where then might we go from here, with regard to the past, present, and future of Thanksgiving? Let's start with just a few more considerations about the past, then move to some new possibilities for the present and future.

Regarding the past, I would invite us to reflect on what we might be able to do within our various spheres of influence to advocate for a more honest and full accounting of what has come before. Such an accounting could include a lot of different things, but I will limit myself to two significant points in particular.

First, a more honest historical accounting of Thanksgiving's origins would include acknowledgment that the original event was not at all the big deal it has been made out to be, but rather an historical footnote later charged and embellished over time for political reasons—as historical accounts so often are. For the original participants, the event was probably little more than a small blip on their radar: **"English records running hundreds of pages dedicate only a handful of lines to [what we now think of as] the legendary First Thanksgiving, and then only in passing. The Wampanoags do not appear to have put much stock in it either"** (Silverman129). For the future, we can choose to retell the story of that day—and the evolution of our contemporary holiday, within the larger context of Indigenous and White relations over the years.

This preferred, more honest and full accounting of Thanksgiving's origins would also more legitimately begin much earlier, and from an Indigenous point of view; it would include details of archeological records of Indigenous civilizations on this land going back years (Silverman 27-29). This evidence-based version of the Thanksgiving Day story would also reference the more immediate backstory for that 1621 meal.

Here's the way I learned the Thanksgiving story growing up in South Carolina: the Indians were wary of the Pilgrims at first because those Indians were naive and thunderstruck. The unfiltered truth is exactly the opposite: every action the Wampanoags took in 1620 and 1621 "was informed by the legacy of the many European ships that had visited their shores [in prior years] and left behind a wave of enslavement, murder, theft, and mourning" (Silverman 71).

In particular, in the years just prior to the 1620 arrival of the Mayflower, the Wampanoag—and many other Indigenous peoples—had been devastated by a 1616-1619 smallpox epidemic brought to this land by previous European colonizers (106-107). Similar to the impact we have seen play out with today's *novel* Coronavirus, smallpox was likewise a *novel* disease to Indigenous peoples: **"None of the adults**

had developed resistance through exposure in childhood and therefore nearly everyone became ill at the same time without anyone left to provide care" (102). Without modern medicine, up to 70 to 80 percent of those infected died. Overall, that first Thanksgiving was a much more minor affair, with a much grimmer background than is typically acknowledged.

Turning toward the **present,** and toward where we might go from here, I'm reminded of a film that came out a little more than twenty years ago titled *The Ice Storm*, directed by Ang Lee. It is set during the Thanksgiving holiday of 1973, not long after that first National Day of Mourning in 1970. In one among many unforgettable scenes, the parents force their teenage daughter (who has been learning about the troubled parts of our county's past) to say a Thanksgiving prayer. She says:

> Dear Lord, thank you for this Thanksgiving holiday. And for all the material possessions we have and enjoy. And for letting us white people kill all the Indians and steal their tribal lands. And stuff ourselves like pigs, even though children in Asia are being napalmed. (Baker 211)

I think of that scene sometimes as emblematic of telling Indigenous' history in a brutally honest form—but that's not necessarily the only or best way.

From another, more mature perspective, let me lift up an excerpt from a speech made a few years ago by the head of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, addressing the wide variety of how Thanksgiving is responded to in the present from various Indigenous perspectives. He said:

> The Thanksgiving holiday is a complicated day for our people. We are forever intertwined with the American Thanksgiving myth, however inaccurate it may be. Some of our people choose to observe this day as a Day of Mourning. Some choose to celebrate in a thoroughly American way. Many choose a different path, spending the day with family and friends, but acknowledging our unique history and connection to this day. (Silverman 421)

I appreciate his point—that there is no single correct way to commemorate Thanksgiving today.

If, however, there is one approach to our contemporary Thanksgiving Day that seems to have the largest consensus, it is the simple practice of *gratitude.* And even though our understanding of that practice may not go back 400 years, it is the power and meaning inherent in that practice that I always invoke in our benediction each Sunday, when I urge us all, myself included, to live boldly—and with thanksgiving.

Along these lines, there are numerous Indigenous educators who emphasize the practice of gratitude as part of a Thanksgiving holiday at its best. And from an Indigenous perspective, such a practice of gratitude often includes, again in the words of the head of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, that we are still here despite the adversities faced over the centuries.

As I move toward my conclusion, I will briefly address the potential **future** of our national Thanksgiving holiday. Thankfully, my sermon is just one small part in a growing movement to reconsider both Thanksgiving in particular as well as Indigenous People's rights and perspectives more broadly. We explored some of those possibilities in our recent service on decolonization, on the Sunday closest to Indigenous People's Day. That sermon is in our online archive for anyone interested.

There was also a major focus, at the annual UU General Assembly in 2020, on our deepening partnership with Indigenous leaders to explore how to co-exist in right relationship with one another and the land we occupy. Many of these programs are part of a showcase of on-demand UU video recordings available free online.

For now, I will leave you with these words on "Reframing Thanksgiving" from my colleague, The Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, President of our Unitarian Universalist Association:

> In this season of turning and change, marked by so much heartbreak and loss, I continue to be inspired by all the ways Unitarian Universalists like you are actively showing up willing to deeply examine the complicity of our nation's stories in hiding the truth of the brutality and conquest of peoples and lands that have been foundation of the United States' history and our continued perpetuation of racial and caste-like systems of hierarchy and domination. May we keep doing this work to dismantle these myths and offer a bolder, more powerful, yes to the liberating

change that is possible within our faith communities and with our larger communities and for our planet. And on this day, let us be grateful in a genuine manner. Let our gratitude flow from our deep, ongoing commitment to justice and equity. Let our gratitude grow from the beauty and abundance of the earth, and the miracle of life. Let our gratitude grow from the opportunities we have to be together authentically—whether virtually or in person, in the fullness of our humanity. And may we continue to grow in our capacity for courage, compassion, solidarity and justice within and beyond our communities.