



A Native American Thanksgiving

Nancy Hufnagel

Thanksgiving is a time when family and friends come together to relax and enjoy a delicious dinner. The holiday evokes images of a lavish feast with turkey and all the trimmings, pumpkin pie and, of course, football.

Children perform reenactments of that first Thanksgiving wearing construction-paper head-dresses with feathers and Pilgrim hats. History teaches us that when the Pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock in 1620, they were poor and hungry, half of them dying within the first year. Squanto, a Wampanoag man, had pity and compassion for them, teaching them the local customs of planting, gathering, and preserving foods. The Wampanoags even fed them through the winter. In 1621,

the pilgrims and natives celebrated the first harvest with a bountiful feast which later became known as Thanksgiving.

This is where the history-book story ends and children are left with a false impression that the Pilgrims and Native Americans continued their warm, fuzzy relationship. The whole truth is not fully taught in schools. Early English explorers brought with them smallpox which decimated much of the native population. Some estimate that diseases accounted for a death toll reaching 90% in some of their communities.

By 1623, Mather the Elder, a Pilgrim leader, was giving thanks to his God for destroying the heathen savages to make way “for better growth,” meaning his own people. More and more boatloads of “entitled” English settlers began

arriving in New England. They raided village after village, slaughtering men, women and children. In many cases, women and children over the age of 14 were sold into slavery. Boats loaded with as many as 500 slaves regularly left the ports of New England. Even the friendly Wampanoags did not escape the madness. In light of these facts, one might ask, “Should Thanksgiving be celebrated?” Native Americans are even divided over this issue.

THE CHOICE TO CELEBRATE

Many Native Americans celebrate the holiday by reinterpreting the event. They do not celebrate the Eurocentric version of Thanksgiving, but hold on to the original message that the Wampanoag people had that day—a harvest feast to give thanks. Giving thanks every day and every season is deeply rooted

in Native American culture. Before the English settlers arrived in New England, the Wampanoags held six yearly harvest festivals. The Maple Dance thanked the Creator for the maple trees and their syrup. This was the beginning of their new year. Next was the Planting Festival when the seeds were blessed, and this was followed by the Strawberry Festival that celebrated the first fruits of the season. Summer's Green Corn Festival gave thanks to the ripening corn and late fall's Harvest Festival gave thanks to the harvested crops. The Mid-Winter Festival was the last one of the old year. This deep connection to Mother Earth is the basis of their spirituality.

Jacqueline Keeler, writer and member of the Dineh and Yankton Dakota Sioux, celebrates the holiday by honoring the compassion and contributions that the Wampanoag people made to the Pilgrims. "They were not merely "friendly Indians," she says, "They had already experienced European slave traders raiding their villages for a hundred years or so, and they were wary—but it was their way to give freely to those who had nothing." They believed that by giving there would be enough for all.

The fact that her ancestors survived the many betrayals and atrocities gives Keeler hope that there can be healing. "Because if we can survive, with our ability to give and share intact, then the evil and good that met that Thanksgiving day in the land of Wampanoag will have come full circle."

NATIONAL DAY OF MOURNING

For many in the native commu-
nity, Thanksgiving is a grim

reminder of the genocide of their people. On that day, they gather at the top of Cole's Hill overlooking Plymouth Rock and observe a "National Day of Mourning." It is an annual protest organized in 1970, by *The Native Americans of New England*, to educate people about what really happened when the Pilgrims came to New England.

Dennis Zotigh, a cultural specialist at the National Museum of the American Indian, wrote on the Smithsonian Museum's blog, "The Thanksgiving myth has done so much damage and harm to the cultural self-esteem of generations of Indian people, including myself, by perpetuating negative and harmful images to both young Indian and non-Indian minds."

He remembers being asked to bring a brown paper sack to school so it could be decorated and worn as part of the Indian costume. He believes this trivializes and degrades the proud Wampanoags. "There are so many things wrong with the happy celebration that takes place in elementary schools and its association to American Indian culture; compromised integrity, stereotyping, and cultural misappropriation are three examples."

Zotigh also said that he has heard that some parents sign their kids out of school on the day of the Thanksgiving reenactments. Their children have been punished in class for bringing up the American Indian's side of the story and demanding that "the national moral atrocity of genocide" be acknowledged. While Zotigh agrees that elementary-school children are too young to hear the truth, he feels that educators need to share Thanksgiving facts in all American schools sometime before high school graduation.

Dear Nancy,

I am a graduate student in the Native American Studies program at MSU. I am an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. According to an article written by Mr. Rush Limbaugh, the pilgrims that first landed here from the Mayflower were nearly half-dead and starving, so the Indians helped them, or at least if you learned about Thanksgiving in any K-12 public school, that is what you were taught. A pilgrim leader named William Bradford assigned a plot of land to all the pilgrims and consequently they were taught to live off the land by the Indians, to hunt, fish, and plant corn. So, to celebrate their survival and their new freinds, they had a big dinner with the harvest. Sure, I can see that, I guess.

We are a very accepting, loving people; however, President George Washington stated in a proclamation that it is God who we all should give thanks to. Thanksgiving was always celebrated by my family with giving thanks to God. Since both parents had to go to Catholic boarding schools, they were influenced by the Fransiscans, so we prayed and gave thanks to God for everything we had.

Another reason we gave thanks is because we are not only Native Americans, but also Americans. Both my parents are WWII veterans. They both helped this country survive by serving, and so, on Thanksgiving, I give thanks and praise for them, for this country, and for the opportunity to share in a national holiday with my fellow-American brothers and sisters, regardless of race. My thanks is given to Tunkasila (Grandfather, the First One, or God).

**Sincerely,
Lisa Short Bull**

Greetings, Nancy,

My name is Red Haircrow and I'm a Native American graduate student at MSU and was forwarded your message.

Otherwise, I am a published author, freelance news correspondent, and psychologist, among other things.

I worked actively as well as volunteered and have been an elected official of Indian Education, a part of federal programs in US school systems. Personally, as one who grew up in Indian and public

school systems as a native, and then seeing my son go through the system... while hoping for improvement in accurate information on indigenous issues in the US, can you imagine my son's feelings having other students mock, laugh, ape you, and repeat stereotypes and harassment to you, while the school staff did little or nothing?

I had hoped in 25+ years it would improve, but it didn't. My son is 17 now, but still it continues in what seems primarily an effort to keep the quaint, homey autumn hugfest despite the origins of what prompted the Thanksgiving "festivities."

And while we natives are now having a greater and wider voice of challenge, too many still whine, complain, or either become aggressive or accusative, with our requests to show the true history, so that the US might come together in a true meeting of equals. So why are we still dismissed, attacked, and mocked on radio, news sources, etc.?

You are welcome to contact me at any time and to view my website at RedHaircrow.com.

**Regards,
Red Haircrow**

On the positive side, some schools are making headway in teaching revisionist Thanksgiving lessons. Both parents and teachers have a tremendous influence on the way children think about Thanksgiving.

HEALING THE SPLIT

I was inspired to research and write this article after listening to a video of a heart wrenching speech given on "The National Day of Mourning." Like many Americans, I was blissfully unaware of the schism in our country surrounding this issue. For the last 18 years on the Friday after Thanksgiving, the town of Plymouth hosts a lavish weekend long celebration that attracts thousands of people. It is advertised as America's hometown festival where, "history is brought to life as Pilgrims AND Native Americans... proudly climb out



of the history books and onto the streets of Plymouth." At the same time, Native Americans gather atop Cole's Hill above the city to protest a national holiday that was established on a lie that has been perpetuated and glorified generation after generation.

The denial of the Native American plight is buried deep within the American psyche. And like a psychic wound, it festers until it is exposed and brought into the light of consciousness. The importance of this issue can no longer be dismissed or minimized. This is not about carrying the guilt of the crimes our ancestors committed so long ago. It is about bridging the gap. Truth is the healing balm that opens the door to understanding, compassion, and honest communication.

There is much positivity about Thanksgiving—relaxing and feasting with friends and family, thanking the Creator for our blessings, and sharing our bounty with the underprivileged. A reconciliation with the Native Americans about the reality of our history would restore harmony and bring honor and integrity to this day of thanks. ■

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