

Transforming Thanksgiving
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
November 24, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

Thanksgiving has been my favorite holiday for years. I love that celebrating it is not necessarily very commercial, it's not particularly religious, and the underlying premise is gratitude and togetherness. I also really love cooking, and as a former stage manager and current systems nerd, I also really love how accomplished I feel when I pull off complicated feats of project management like making a multicourse feast with one oven and managing to get everything done at close to the same time. I also love the autumn and broader traditions of harvest festivals and holidays that correspond to cycles of nature.

However, I can't separate the pieces that I really love from the white supremacist mythology that was taught alongside the holiday tradition, and the genocide of millions of Native people perpetuated by our dominant culture is very present. Whitewashing the pain and mourning that American Thanksgiving represents in so many communities to this day doesn't feel responsible. I've really struggled with how to let all of those factors coexist.

Ritual and tradition can be such valuable parts of culture - they can create benchmarks by which we measure the passage of our lives, they can be shared narratives that we use to define ourselves as groups, they can be prescribed steps that lend us feelings of control or unity or faith, and they can be ways to build meaningful connections with our forebears, and give us a sense of continuity and legacy. And yet, as a member of a dominant and colonialist culture, many of my beloved traditions have been historically intertwined with violence. I don't get to pick and choose which parts of that complicated truth I accept.

Rituals and ideology are also so hard to disentangle. For example, I grew up Catholic, and the aesthetics of Catholicism, the incense and the chanting and the glorious architecture of so many churches and so much of sacred music and even the kneeling and the rosaries... honestly all of that really speaks to me emotionally. It gives me a feeling of connection to thousands of years of history and generations and generations of my ancestors. But I can't earnestly enjoy that feeling without also bundling those feelings up with the grief and chagrin at the knowledge that the Catholic church has also hurt a lot of people and has an extremely bloody and oppressive past, and continues to perpetuate policies and practices that I believe do harm today. Participating in the rituals stopped feeling responsible to me at some point, because it felt like giving my tacit support and implied agreement to that institution.

Right now, this kind of tension feels like a much bigger deal than ever before - maybe because such a big part of the political discourse on the right seems to be about cultural supremacy, and so many moves have been made towards enforcing a Christian, Eurocentric, patriarchal, heteronormative, white supremacist set of cultural ideals on the public, whether through states adding more Bible to public schools, with Texas just approving a Bible based Elementary school curriculum this past week, or the flurry of book censorship in public libraries or legislation banning abortion and so many more examples big and small, with that trend feeling like it's on the rise, especially after this last election. And no matter how little I recognize any of those ideals personally, if I'm sharing the same rituals and cultural

touchstones as people who use culture as a bludgeon, that means I have to reckon with the question of how much the ideals can be separated from the practices.

As a member of an oppressive culture, I'm not sure that it's possible to have untainted cultural traditions, and yet I also don't want to be without any cultural traditions or emotional connections to my forebears, and especially lately, those are feeling increasingly mutually exclusive. I would love to find a way to transform Thanksgiving away from harm, but it's not always clear what that looks like or when such a transformation is still possible vs when it's better to declare something unsalvageable, walk away, and create something new. I keep wrestling with it, but this year at least my family will still gather and try to focus on gratitude and connection, but more and more Thanksgiving is also becoming a time for grief and mourning.

Musical Inspiration available to watch on Youtube: [One World \(We Are One\)](#)

***Transforming Thanksgiving*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

The video you just watched was released on Indigenous People's Day five years ago. At that time, they wrote:

"Today on Indigenous Peoples' Day and every day we are here to say that We Are Still Here. Research has shown that the lack of representation of Native peoples in mainstream society creates a void that limits the understanding and knowledge that Americans have of Native communities. We are here to fight the invisibility that Natives face by amplifying contemporary, authentic Native voices, and supporting Native peoples tell their story. We as humans all live in this one world where we have to work and live together. Our goal is for Native peoples to be normalized in a current today and show accurate and positive representations of our people. IllumiNative is an initiative, created and led by Natives, to challenge the negative narrative that surrounds Native communities and ensure accurate and authentic portrayals of Native communities are present in pop culture and media. Mag 7 is a collective of seven MCs and songwriters from different tribes, who came together for hope and optimism. The members of Mag 7 are Drezus (Plains Cree tribe), Supaman (Crow tribe), PJ Vegas (Shoshone / Yaqui tribes), Kahara Hodges (Navajo tribe), Doc Native (Seminole tribe), Spencer Battiest (Seminole tribe), and Emcee One (Osage/Potawatomi tribes)."

Just beautiful. And the story for all ages was written by a member of the Cherokee Nation. I included that because nothing is more basic to Native cultures, as I understand them, than the expression of gratitude. "We are rooted in cultures of gratitude" writes Robin Wall Kimmerer, member of the Potawatomi Nation. Many ancient cultures are rooted in gratitude. I think I don't have to say that a culture of gratitude is not the culture of consumerist America, and so this runs counter to forces around us that try to shape us.

Many of us, Emily and I, for example, love the Thanksgiving holiday for that counter-cultural expression of gratitude. I have a cousin who was born on a Thanksgiving day, and so in my family we connect the holiday to her birthday – even though her birthday doesn't fall on the holiday each year. It is more about family, food, and tradition, than Puritans and Indians which always seemed like a remote story from school and not from my family.

But then again, I have Puritan ancestors, not Indigenous ones, and so as a descendant of the conquerors, I accepted the story told in my school that portrayed the Puritans as innocent and grateful recipients of Native wisdom that helped them survive those first winters. I accepted that story until I learned more, and that learning, I'm sorry to say, didn't take place in my public school. The reality of that history doesn't just disappoint, it hurts: It shocks, it shakes me to the core.

My colleague, Monica, whose husband, Jacob was the MC for that dessert auction and daughter, Anne, is in RE, used to serve a congregation in Massachusetts where that origin story of the first Thanksgiving took place. She tells me of the powerful experience they had each year of standing in the back observing with other non-Natives as members of the Wampanoag tribe, descendants of those who watched the Mayflower arrive on their shores in 1620, mark the day as a National Day of Mourning. This gathering on Cole's Hill in Plymouth has taken place since 1970. Thanksgiving Day, for them, is a reminder of the genocide of millions of Native people, the theft of Native lands and the erasure of Native cultures. Participants in National Day of Mourning honor Indigenous ancestors and Native resilience. It is a day of remembrance and spiritual connection, as well as a protest against the racism and oppression that Indigenous people continue to experience worldwide.

A West Coast version takes place in San Francisco, Unthanksgiving Day, or Day of Remembrance. I would imagine other, smaller, remembrances take place all over this stolen land.

There are additional reasons Thanksgiving is a complicated, even tragic, holiday. I know those who loathe it as a holiday of excess - food, alcohol and football, with a consumerist injection of Black Friday shopping deals. Of course, some folks love it for those same reasons. This year, the families who will gather and steadfastly avoid talk of politics and religion, may find relations strained by the very different reactions to the recent presidential election. And some families will not gather for that very reason. Some individuals will absent themselves from those family gatherings for fear of interacting with members who voted differently and believe hold different values.

This recognition of the pain that comes with this day has led many to make alternative plans. Friendsgiving is a popular tradition - not necessarily on the same day as Thanksgiving - but an opportunity to gather with one's family of choice, rather than family of birth. These Friendsgiving gatherings can provide a safe space, especially for individuals for whom their family of birth was or is not safe.

There are families who choose to eat foods native to the land they are on, rather than the foods considered "traditional" which were not a part of that first mythical feast anyway. I can confidently claim that there was no green bean casserole with fried onions and cream of mushroom soup at that First Thanksgiving, important as that has become to my immediate family.

One might begin with mourning and end in celebration, which is often the emotional arc of the response to death and tragedy. And gratitude is certainly worth preserving. And family, whether that be of choice or biological.

There is certainly no single answer or response to the need to transform this national holiday into a more honest and meaningful day. And perhaps you've already done it and don't have the qualms Emily expressed this morning. But I think I want to offer a similar response to that which I gave the Sunday after the election: we can turn to our values. It is so easy in this consumerist, supremacist and violent society to lose sight of our values and absorb the messages from a society, I think, we can all describe as unhealthy.

If the world be sick, can't no one be well, but I wish we was all beautiful and strong.

In an unhealthy society, naming the positive values we seek to embody instead can be helpful. One of those values is family and our interdependence – we are all family. One World. One People. One Tribe.

That value of interdependence teaches us that our fates are intertwined, that our connections are complicated, or, as generations younger than mine might put it, “there is no ethical consumption in late stage capitalism.” We make choices, and because everything is so connected, those choices can never be morally pure. If you think Unitarian Universalism has left our Puritan roots behind, just listen to how hard we try to “get things right,” “make the ethical choice” – I’m not saying we shouldn’t make the best possible choice available to us, but I am saying we should judge less the choices of others because perfection is simply impossible, ethical consumption doesn’t exist, and moral purity is but a dream.

This value of interdependence instructs us to both grieve and try to mitigate the impact of colonization on this continent and its inhabitants and to celebrate our survival, appreciate our family ties, and work to strengthen them, to build that *one world, one people*.

As we are one people, we recognize pluralism – that is we have differences which must be recognized, honored, and respected, even celebrated. And we strive for equity among the people, a sharing of resources, and access, and inclusion.

Because we value justice, we recognize the injustice that surrounds and engulfs us, the injustice we have perpetuated and fought to overturn. We do our best to balance the injustices of the past with reparations and justice-making in the present.

And generosity. Generosity cultivates that spirit of gratitude and hope and connects us to one another in those relationships of interdependence and mutuality. We must re-root ourselves in our ancient cultures of gratitude, rejecting the culture of consumerism and extreme individualism. We must freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources with one another.

Our theme this month has been the value of Transformation because we must adapt to a changing world, especially when the changes terrify us. The reason we must be open to even the terrifying changes – the election of a fascist, for example, or the admission that our national history is a violent one – is because we can’t transform that which we don’t recognize. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically.

All these values are rooted in the most important value – love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

I’ve talked before about the polarization detox challenge, which promises to help you “overcome the toxic polarization harming your health, your relationships, and our country’s ability to thrive, starting with one short exercise a day.” I continue to get those exercises texted and emailed to me. (You can find them at startswith.us) These exercises are based on decades of research at Columbia University by Peter T. Coleman. The 3 tips they offer for Thanksgiving dinnertime conversation include:

#1 – Don’t try to change people’s mind. Remain curious, however. They suggest language beginning with “I’m not trying to change your mind: I genuinely want to understand your point of view better.” or “I’m not trying to change your mind: I just want you to know why I think what I do.”

Tip #2: Focus on core concerns and less on specific points. I would even frame it to “focus on core values.” Often, other people’s high-level concerns or values are much easier for us to understand than specific, granular pieces of information or misinformation.

Tip #3: Talk less about issues and more about our divides: Many Americans agree there’s far too much toxicity and contempt, and so that is an area where you might find common ground. Talking about specific issues might be too contentious, but you might find agreement in a discussion of the broader issue of our divides.

I think it’s a loving place to start with those family members to whom you are tied and with whom you disagree. I do believe that it is our work to bridge these divides. Though I do believe we just elected a divider to the highest office of the country, I don’t believe that means that those who voted for him are necessarily seeking division. In fact, the research done at Columbia University indicates that many of us want unity and civility, even if we don’t really know how to manifest it.

Ross Gay thinks it is sad that we think of joy as meaning “without pain” or “without sorrow” because that definition suggests that someone might be able to live free of heartbreak or sorrow. “What happens if joy is not separate from pain?” he writes “What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other *through* these things?” What if joy is what emerges from how we care for each other *through* pain or suffering or sorrow? The same can be said of gratitude and mourning. What if gratitude is what emerges from how we care for each other through the grief and mourning? What if?

I am grateful to this community who is helping us care for each other through profound grief and mourning. We are exploring transformation because we must adapt to a changing world. Many of those changes have happened without our consent, but we must adapt to the new circumstances in order to transform them. And we do it with love. We will get there. *Heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.*