

Blessings of Thanksgiving



Rev. Dr. Susan Suchocki Brown

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Traditionally Thanksgiving has something to do with those who came from England, the Pilgrims, seeking to establish a new holy city, a new world, a new Jerusalem where they would be able to freely practice their religion and where they would be able to establish a trade route and lucrative business with the old world. The Pilgrims were the first original illegal immigrants who were reluctantly welcomed by the natives who already lived here. It was not an easy settling, nor an easy union with the first peoples. The first year was a great trial and over half of those who originally landed here died. The cemetery overlooking the Plymouth Rock and the Plymouth Bay contains the bodies of many of those first settlers, buried in an unmarked mass grave. These Pilgrims were meant to land in Virginia but landed in what was to become Massachusetts instead. It was a tough beginning but in the second year they did well and the crops yielded a good enough harvest. Supposedly the relationships that they had established with the indigenous people resulted in a feast of thanksgiving

held in 1621. As with most history, the story that has come to us has a unique and clear bias, and is more myth than fact. The relationships with the native people was tentative at best and limited to just a few native people who were curious and or compassionate enough to interact with those early Pilgrims. This, in spite of the fact, that the Pilgrims found and stole all the hidden baskets of corn kernels that the Native people had hid to be used as seed when they came out of winter living. Not a way to endear oneself to the people who you might have to depend on for survival into the future. However, the land did yield a good harvest in the second year but the learning curve of what to plant and grow here in this native soil probably was a little slower than the stories would indicate. The story we have long been taught is that out of celebration for survival of that first year and a good harvest the first Thanksgiving was held.

However long before the Pilgrims arrived on the shores of the New England in fact since the beginning of time most communities and people gathered for harvest festivals. These harvest festivals have been held within all countries and all cultures.

From the book, *History of Food*, I quote,
“Once the last sheaf had been carried home in triumph, the celebration of harvest festival began with a lavish and well-earned meal. ... Harvest, despite mechanization, is still an occasion when friends and relations gather for a party.... To the Celts, this was Samhain (Sowin) (we would know this as Halloween), it is the beginning of the New Year. The Christmas goose had been hatched at Easter. (And was nine months old and now ready to be eaten). These traditions, which are often still observed although their significance is forgotten, echo ancient agricultural rites

designed to perpetuate the rhythm of the seasons, ensuring passage from one agricultural cycle to the next.”¹

So the reality is more likely, that during the second season here, the Pilgrims were carrying on a long, long tradition of a harvest festival. That is until they began to not take part in any of the past practices from the country they came from and until they began distancing themselves from the past by not celebrating harvest festivals but going without celebration and festivities, and instead spending the day fasting, and praying. For the Pilgrims, who had settled in Massachusetts, by erroneously landing here instead of in Virginia were replaced by the Puritans. The Puritans were a dour lot. Their strict, solemn, and dreary religious practices led them to establish, instead of feasting and celebrating, days of fasting, praying, preaching and going without. All to atone for sins real or imagined, to repent for not living up to sainthood and for disappointing THE GOD. The Pilgrims brought us here and survived and the Puritans, gained power and became the dominant cultural group, they tainted the earlier religious practices and mixed punishment and depravation into religion.

I am not one to want to give a history lesson or to try to tie up the complicated and convoluted beginnings of our nation into one sermon. It is too complex a history, but suffice to say thanksgiving as intended by all the earliest people from all cultures, Greek, Roman, Celtic, Asian, and even with this countries first immigrants, the Pilgrims, was always a time of thanksgiving for blessings received. For health, for crops, for harvest abundance, for a reminder of the sacrifices one must make to survive, for the land, for the people, for the sun and rain and the fruits of the earth.

¹ Maguelonne Toussaint- Samat, translated by Anthea Bell, *History of Food*. 146

Of and on throughout the centuries days for being with family and friends, for sharing meals from the harvest yields, and for offering blessings and thanks were being held.

In 1941 Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale began successfully lobbying for the fourth Thursday in November to become the national holiday we know now as Thanksgiving. But until then Thanksgiving was an erratic holiday, and for the Puritans who wanted to bring pure religious practices to the new America, harvest festivals if celebrated at all were done with a religious meaning and not tied to feasting and plenty. The focus was not on filling oneself till stuffed with traditional fare. The focus was on religion and as I said atoning for sin through fasting.

Yet, feasting and fasting do fit together in an interesting way, for both can be done to extreme. Feasting till we can't move on Thanksgiving Thursday and fasting for religious observations till we can't move: well neither are healthy.

And who among us hasn't feasted on Thanksgiving until we can't move. Enjoying all those traditional family treats is a real blessing isn't it? I love to soak the Tapioca in water the night before I make it, I love to clear a corner of the refrigerator to hold the apple pie and cheddar cheese, I love to see the big bag of root vegetables come in to the house, with beets, sweet potatoes, squash, and turnips. I love to bake on Wednesday and then on Thursday sit and eat and then rest. As for fasting, that is a religious practice I don't seem to have a desire to explore. Though I do know it is and can be a restorative health practice. And an important fact about fasting for Ramadan, or during Lent, or during spiritual cleansing experiences, is that it is not about fasting till you are weak and unable to function but until you come to appreciate moderation, it is doing without

something to learn how to temper our immediate and willful gratification of desires.

It is cultivating appreciation for the blessings we have so when you break the fast you do so with a new appreciation for the snap of a good apple, with a new appreciation for the smell of fresh cooked meal, with a new appreciation for the taste of salt and spice, with a new appreciation for that soothing, warm and comfortable feeling in the belly that accompanies an adequate meal.

The two extremes of feasting or fasting without the development and expression of appreciation, gratitude, or thankfulness lead only to unceasing hunger.

This unending unhealthy cycle of feasting and fasting can only be filled with love, and compassion, and by developing an appreciation of self and others, and by having a relationship with whatever it is that you call the divine or God.

So enjoy this Thanksgiving Thursday but don't forget to be appreciative for the gift of family, friends, food, harvest and life. Strive for balance and attempt to find inner harmony and develop an appreciation for life and the choices we can all make.

Blessed be Happy Thanksgiving, May all good blessings be with you and yours. So Be It.