

Harvest the Power: Reframing Thanksgiving

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Offered November 20, 2020

Sermon

I join you from my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the occupied ancestral lands of the Massachusett who lived here for at least 12,000 years before Europeans came. Massachusett people still live in the area, including the Massachusett Tribe at Ponkapoag.

I am Susan Frederick-Gray, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I am grateful to be here today - gathered across the distance - for this Justice Convergence and Teach-In - reframing Thanksgiving. And as I begin my message, I want to acknowledge and express my gratitude to the Rev. Clyde Grubbs and Ann Gilmore for their support in researching and crafting this message. It truly was a joint effort.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Day of Mourning tradition. When Frank Wamsutta James called upon hundreds of Indigenous Americans and allies to gather in Plymouth, Massachusetts and declare Thanksgiving Day a National Day of Mourning for Native Americans.

In 1970 the town of Plymouth sought to celebrate the 350 anniversary of the coming of Mayflower. Officials reached out to James and asked him to speak as a Wampanoag to the gathering. James wrote his speech based on his extensive knowledge of the impact of white settlement on the original people. The organizers asked to see a copy of his remarks and when they read what James was prepared to say they withdrew their invitation. He did not flatter the invaders or excuse the violence with happy talk and retelling the fictional story of a "Thanksgiving" celebration.

He wrote: "History wants us to believe that the Indian was a savage, illiterate, uncivilized animal. A history that was written by an organized, disciplined people, to expose us as an unorganized and undisciplined entity. Two distinctly different cultures met. One thought they must control life; the other believed life was to be enjoyed, because nature decreed it."

James, insulted by the rejection, called for protest, articulating that the day should be called a Day of Mourning for Native Americans. The demonstration garnered national attention to the growing movement of native peoples that was making itself known across the country with actions such as the occupation of Alcatraz, the founding of the American Indian Movement and a few years later a march across the United States to Washington DC to protest the treatment of the original people.

James' censored speech ended with an acknowledgement that, even after 350 years of colonization, Wampanoags and other Indigenous peoples have kept their spirit and their



determination to continue their identities, their communities, and their cultures. He saw that anniversary of the Pilgrim's arrival as a new beginning for the rising of "the American Indian, particularly the Wampanoag, to regain the position in this country that is rightfully ours."

The National Day of Mourning protest in Plymouth continues to this day, now led by his son, Moonanum James and the group that WAMSUTTA James helped found in 1970, the United American Indians of New England (UAINE).

This year also marks the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth. The 400th anniversary of the arrival of colonizers which resulted in the enslavement, forced removal and genocide of millions of Indigenous people.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have been examining and wrestling with this historic and theological legacy of which we are a part. Many UU congregations in New England can trace their lineage directly back to early settler communities that had a role in the attempted genocide of Native communities. I can trace my own ancestry to the Mayflower settlers.

We must be honest that our own Unitarian Universalism has been shaped by and steeped in colonialism and the practices of domination. Yes, there is something deeply life-giving and liberating about our theology that says that "we are part of one great family of all souls," that our destiny is bound together and that no one is outside of the circle of God's love, of creation's web. However, we continue to fail to live in the fullness of this liberating vision. In part, this is because of the limits of our early forebearers, who understood their faith within the context of Christian and European supremacy.

What we often describe as white supremacy culture is a manifestation of the Christian supremacy codified in the late 1400's by Papal bull and known as the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discover established that any land not occupied by Christians, was available to be "discovered" and claimed in the name of Christendom. It established that the people of these "discovered" lands - pagans, non-Christians, savages, as they were called - were to be enslaved and conquered. It posited that Indigenous people did not have souls. It was this doctrine that formed the foundation for the European conquest of much of the globe, including Turtle Island, the Americas. It also formed the foundation of the United States legal code when it came to Indigenous people and their land rights and continues to this day to support the ongoing theft and exploitation of Indigenous land and violations of Indigenous sovereignty.

Early Unitarians and Universalists understood themselves and their faith within this framework of Christian supremacy so the faith we hold so dear - including the Universalism we proudly proclaim - did not recognize and include Indigenous people. Today, we still have work to do to free ourselves from the spiritual corruption of notions of supremacy, domination and exceptionalism.

These notions feed the continuation of practices and policies that marginalize, denigrate and exploit people. They are the foundation of the persistent dehumanizing attacks in



our society against Indigenous people, Black people, people of color, migrants and immigrants, transgender people, gay, lesbian and bisexual people, disabled people and women.

None of us are unharmed by these narratives, none of us are unscathed from these systems of exploitation - even as the impacts are different depending on the identities we hold. Fundamentally, they have the effect of separating us from one another and from our common humanity and interdependence.

And so we have to both make visible and dismantle these narratives and practices - beginning with how they live in ourselves - if we are truly to be about the work of liberation and justice.

An important piece of this work is examining and debunking the Thanksgiving myth and owning our tradition's role in its creation.

In David Silverman's essay "Mourning in America" from the book [This Land Is Their Land](#) (2019), Silverman traces the history of the holiday. While the Wampanoags celebrated many seasonal "Thanksgivings" to celebrate the Earth's bounty and the Creator's many gifts, the first "Thanksgivings" observed by the Pilgrims and the Puritans focused on days of fasting and prayer to thank God for the plagues that wiped out a huge percentage of the Indigenous population in many villages, including all of the Wampanoag population in Patuxet (Plymouth). "Thanksgivings" were also declared to celebrate the slaughter of Indigenous people such as the Pequot massacre in 1637.

Eventually colonial New Englanders began to celebrate each spring and autumn with days of Thanksgiving. These celebrations, particularly the autumn ones, eventually spread to other areas in the 1800's. None of these celebrations were associated with the Pilgrims or with Indigenous people.

The first time this association was made was in 1841, when New England born Unitarian minister Rev. Alexander Young published Pilgrim leader Edward Winslow's only known primary source account of the 1621 Pilgrim and Wampanoag gathering in Plymouth, consisting of only 4 lines. However, Rev. Young added a footnote to the paragraph, stating that "this was the first Thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England." (p 4). So the myth began.

The holiday we have come to know as Thanksgiving was formally created during the Civil War. In 1863, expressing gratitude for the victory of the Union army at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln declared that the fourth Thursday of November should be held as a national day of Thanksgiving. He believed it would foster unity amid the horrors of the war.

Silverman goes on to show how, over time, the association of our national holiday of Thanksgiving with the 1621 "friendly" gathering of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags served to minimize or erase any national recognition of centuries of violence and subjugation of Indigenous people across this continent and minimize the long standing

history of violent enslavement and subjugation of Black people, casting “the so-called Black and Indian problems as southern and western exceptions to an otherwise inspiring national heritage.”

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. May it be so.

