



Thanksgiving Week

The Welcome Table

NOVEMBER 24TH | REV. BETH DANA



Turkey, stuffing, rolls, cheesy green beans, roasted Brussels sprouts, cranberry sauce, and my favorite, mashed sweet potatoes with marshmallows melted on top. Oh, and pie. So much pie. One pie for every two or three people. These were the dishes of my thanksgivings growing up in the northeast.

In 2012, I married a Texan and moved here to the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and my Thanksgiving traditions changed. Instead of sweet potatoes with marshmallows, it's sweet potatoes with brown sugar and nuts. I still prefer the marshmallows. Instead of stuffing, it's called dressing. That took some getting used to. Instead of cranberry sauce, it's the creation affectionately called cranberry stuff, a layered dish of chopped cranberries, crushed pineapple, lemon jello, cream cheese, and pecans, which takes two days to make. The pecan pie now has bourbon in it and sometimes chocolate, but I still make my favorite cheesy green beans for my Texas family, and it's mostly well-received.

This week and in the coming weeks, people around the world mark a number of holidays that bring family, friends, and neighbors together, gathering at a table at your home or at another's home, at a restaurant or at church to share food and fellowship.

The beauty of Thanksgiving is that there's no one right way to celebrate it. I blend my New England Thanksgiving with Texas Thanksgiving traditions these days. So many people like Richard Blanco describes in his poem, "serve the dishes of their own cultures alongside or instead of the traditional Turkey insides." But the common thread through it all is a practice of gratitude, whatever, or however much we have on our table and whoever is gathered around it, it's an opportunity to reflect with

gratitude on what we have and to remind ourselves that we are not our own. The earth, the land on which we gather, our communities, including our faith community, all shape us.

Growing up, my family said a group grace of sorts before the Thanksgiving meal. We'd go around the table giving each person an opportunity to share something that they are thankful for. Instead of inviting the blessings to come to us, we practice naming the blessings already present in our lives, in our family, and right there on the table in front of us. It was not perfunctory. It was meaningful and authentic.

And an authentic Thanksgiving is what Richard Blanco yearned for as a young boy in Miami. He was raised in a family of Cuban exiles whose stories of their homeland in the 1950s and '60s were a picture of paradise. But he longed to be a "true American" or what he understood it meant to be a true American from textbooks, food, commercials, and TV shows, including the Brady Bunch. He wrote the poem *America* as a graduate student at Florida International University inspired by his childhood memories of wanting to experience an authentic Thanksgiving meal. He felt caught between his Cuban ancestry and his American milieu, a banished man without a land as he put it. He had pretty much resigned himself to this in-between experience until he was invited to write a poem for President Obama's second inauguration in 2013. He was the youngest first immigrant, first Latino and first gay presidential inaugural poet.

He tells the story of sitting on the platform next to his mother, waiting to be invited up to read his poem to millions when he turned to her and said, "Well, I guess we're finally Americanos. For the first time in my life," he said, "I knew I had a place at the American table. I had found my place. The greatest gift of the whole experience," he said, "was to realize that I was home all along." His message to the nation was that we are stronger, richer, and more beautiful because of the interesting variety of what we bring to the table.

One of our church's own youth echoed this sentiment during a conversation I had with the youth group the Sunday after election day. They said, "America isn't a melting pot or a salad bowl. It's a potluck. We all bring something to the table to share." Bring all of who you are, our nation and our communities, and our tables can hold all of it and we are all the better for it.

Richard Blanco's poem said to us, we are all home. We all belong. He felt this deeply, and so many others hearing his words did as well. Blanco's words, "For the first time in my life, I knew I had a place at the American table" echo in my mind and pull at my heart because I know that this experience is at risk at this time in America. There are so many powerful forces trying to shrink the American table and restrict who is welcome to sit around it.

Like many, I'm doing Thanksgiving differently this year. I'm not talking about the difference between marshmallows and brown sugar or cranberry sauce versus cranberry stuff. But months ago, my wife Erin and I decided to take the week of Thanksgiving to travel and see friends, not because we're trying to escape our families of origin because we do enjoy spending Thanksgiving with them, but simply because it's a chance to reconnect with dear friends who are like family.

And now that the time has come, our plan feels just right. This year's Thanksgiving gathering will include me and Erin and our kids, a friend who spends most holidays with us and even has a stocking on our mantle at Christmas time, our hosts of course, and a few others who would not otherwise have a warm welcoming table around which to gather. We will nourish our bodies with good food, but we will also care for our spirits by creating a space of sanctuary for each other.

In the weeks since the election, as we've all been navigating various emotions and anticipating what's to come, I have returned again and again to a song called Sanctuary. The music is by Randy Scruggs and John W. Thompson, and the lyrics were written by Unitarian Universalist musician David Ruffin << Make us aware we are a sanctuary. Each made holy, loved right through. With Thanksgiving, we are a living sanctuary anew >> Sounds like some of you know that or at least the tune.

So who are you gathering with this week? What will you bring to the table and how will you be a living sanctuary? Extend a generous welcome and practice gratitude. I have found that gratitude shared is gratitude multiplied, and Thanksgiving is an opportunity to see that maxim become real.

Sarah Josepha Hale, a ladies magazine editor in the mid 1800s at the time of the Civil War, made it her mission to establish an official Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, and she eventually succeeded at influencing President Lincoln to do so in 1863. She was committed to this effort because she insisted it would unify an increasingly divided nation. In 1859, she wrote, "We are already spread and mingled over the union. Each year by bringing us oftener together releases us from the estrangement and coolness consequent on distance and political alienations. Each year multiplies our ties of relationship and friendship. How can we hate our Mississippi brother-in-law? And who is a better fellow than our wife's uncle from St. Louis?"

Now, if we trust the education that most of us received as children, we might think that this is what the first Thanksgiving was like. We have rosy visions of pilgrims and Native Americans sitting down peacefully to together at a long table for a harvest celebration feast. You bring the Turkey and we'll bring the corn. Not quite. This vision was a 19th century invention, one that Sarah Hale surely contributed to. There was a three-day feast in 1621 in which pilgrims and Wampanoag celebrated a successful harvest. They didn't call it Thanksgiving and there was likely a lot of tension around that table far worse than any family tension you or I know. Peace, at whatever level it existed, was short-lived.

The first day called Thanksgiving was organized by the pilgrim churches to celebrate a massacre of "heathen savages." As massacres became more frequent, so did the Thanksgiving feasts. This continued until George Washington suggested they set aside one day per year to celebrate.

One of the lessons of the early Thanksgivings was that gratitude does not always emerge from good fortune or happiness. It can come from difficult times too. This was certainly the case for the pilgrims who were horrible farmers and had been starving until they finally had a good harvest. The problem was their Thanksgiving took the form not of humble gratitude, but of superiority, which was

channeled into the destruction of Native American life and land. Thus, Thanksgiving originated with celebrations of racism and genocide.

From these less than honorable celebrations emerged rituals of gratitude. If we are to transform the legacy, this legacy into one that is life-giving and truly worthy of our gratitude, we might be guided by the words of the hymn we sang just a moment ago. Let us make Thanksgiving. And with justice, willing and aware give to earth and all things living liturgies of care. Let us be a house of welcome, living stone upholding living stone, gladly showing all our neighbors we are not our own.

What if this Thanksgiving our goal was to create a house of welcome, a sanctuary in which we are reminded that we are not our own but wholly interdependent on one another and on the earth? What if our Thanksgiving rituals didn't take welcome for granted and became liturgies of care?

I've had numerous conversations since the election with members of this church, primarily people with marginalized identities who have been grappling with how to spend the holidays this year. Some fear that they will not be welcomed as worthy and holy at their usual Thanksgiving tables. Some are choosing to do something different because they need to care for themselves and their spirit.

This also came up in my recent meeting with the youth group. They talked wholeheartedly and honestly about what it means to seek sanctuary, to create sanctuary for each other and how this will help fortify us for the work that's ahead to resist injustice, to promote the inherent worth and dignity of all, and to fight for a world in which all are truly welcome at the table. They will do so, they said, fueled by the hope they find in their Unitarian Universalist faith.

As a church grounded in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we practice being the kind of community we hope the world will become, a world where all people are treated as worthy of love and where all feel held in love. A love so big that it connects and transforms us and our relationships with each other. We build a religious community here that holds the best and the worst of people, our joys and sorrows, our victories and imperfections, our vulnerability and our strength, a place where we have different understandings of God and the holy, but joined together in common commitment to building a community and a world of love and justice. We do so as resistance to the world in which we live currently. Where those in power insist on narrowing the circle of welcome.

The hymn that we will sing to conclude our service today, I'm going to sit at the welcome table, was written from a position of resistance and sung first by enslaved Africans. The first verse, not included in our hymnal is, "God's going to set this world on fire." Another verse sung during the civil rights movement was, "I'm going to be a registered voter."

Thanksgiving is a holiday that calls us to dream of what our nation could be and what we hope to be. Even though over the course of history, we have repeatedly been unable to fully live up to this dream. Just as Rosana Eckert sang and Reverend Kanter preached a couple weeks ago from here that love won't die here, these dreams won't die here either. I dream of a day when Richard Blanco's vision comes true. When you and I and he all have a place at the American table, where the welcome table is laid out and people are invited to bring their Turkey or pork or tofurkey, yucca or yams, cranberry

sauce or jelly or stuff. We're all going to sit at the welcome table one of these days. Until then, keep the hopeful vision in front of you, the fire of commitment strong in your belly and the warmth of love in your heart. Gather with your beloveds this Thanksgiving, create sanctuaries and liturgies of care. And give thanks for this life, however imperfect it may be that we are blessed to share. May it be so, and amen.