

## **Inclusive Thanksgiving**

Alison Wohler, November 30, 2008  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The guests are gathered around the beautifully set and sumptuously laden Thanksgiving table. I am watching Shirley Schmidt, Dan Fielding, and Denny Crane (otherwise known as Candice Bergen, John Larroquette, and William Shatner) among others from the ABC series Boston Legal. The conversation varies from politics to race to religion to the economy to the pointedly personal. Why are they being so “difficult,” we wonder? It is all highly charged and volatile – no one is even trying to disguise their hostilities. Shirley, the hostess, having entertained different expectations for this Thanksgiving meal, finally shouts above the din “Can’t we just eat and make small talk and pretend we like each other?”

It is hilariously funny, and of course, so real for some families. Not mine of course, (I think we actually do like each other) but I did dive for the pad of paper in my bed-side stand to remember Shirley’s words for this sermon. “Can’t we just eat and make small talk and pretend we like each other?”

My Mom called on Friday to say Happy Thanksgiving. They had been invited to Thursday dinner at their neighbors’, and as my mother described it “We were the only Democrats in a sea of Republicans.” And for sure the only Unitarian Universalists at the table I would also add. But *at* this table everyone did just eat and make small talk and they did get along with each other. On many if limited levels. My mom had a good laugh as she told me about this dinner on the phone. I guess it was, at least for my parents, an elephant-in-the-room kind of thing (pun intended) and they were relieved that nothing *uncomfortable* had happened.

Their dinner at the neighbor’s was, to be sure, one of millions of examples of dinners across our country on Thursday at which people found – in some unspoken and mutually independent way – things about which everyone at the table could be thankful, even if only their mutual humanity, the bounty of the meal, and their ability to enjoy both.

There is a lot that could be dissected about Thanksgiving dinners!

Our Thanksgiving table had a combination of family and friends, about 15 of us in all. I always have a secret wish that we will have some deep and meaningful conversation about the things we are thankful for – but usually what happens is that I am too tired from the flurry of last minute preparations to put any energy into making this conversation happen. And unless you are *accustomed* to having this kind of significant conversation, they do not just happen spontaneously. It occurred to me last night, though, that I could share with all of *you* what some of my contributions to such a conversation might be, should it ever happen. Maybe we will find that our sentiments are similar?

Besides being happy and thankful to be with *whoever* is at the table on any particular year, what I think about at Thanksgiving dinners is all that has gone before that has brought me there. Most years I think about my Grandmother Thomas and the dish of hers I use every year for cranberry sauce. And I am thankful to have this little thing that meant something to her and now means something to me. I think about Grandma Adams (Grandma Toots) and the great variety of dishes she would serve for Thanksgiving meals. I remember hearing, often, from long ago when I was very young, about how she really didn't need to serve so much, nobody could possibly eat this all this food, and then I think I really did get some of my genes from this woman. And I am thankful.

I think about my first husband, the father of my children, and I am thankful for all the many good things that have come to me from that part of my life. I sure had fun being a grandma this weekend!

I think about the little Native American totem of a bear that I put on the table with all the other little decorations on Thursday. It was given to me by a friend when that husband died – the bear as a totem of healing – and I carried it with me, on my person, for many, many years. This year I put it on my Thanksgiving table. We all need to be healed in some way. I am thankful for the many people who have held me and kept me going on my journey to this place and this moment.

I think too about the history of this country, including that first Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims and the Native Americans, the good and the bad parts of our history. There are many immoral, illegal, sad, shameful acts of our governments and our people about which I am very sorry. I think one can be thankful for the ability to be sorry, for the capacity to make amends or at least speak the truth. For these things I am thankful.

This year I am very thankful for the hope I feel following our national presidential election. I had even found a reading I thought might be nice to read at our Thanksgiving meal – what was I thinking? But I'll read it to you! It's from a book of prayers assembled for the recent millennium celebration. The authors of this prayer are Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson from the Center for Visionary Leadership in Washington, D.C.. I don't think they could have imagined how appropriate their words would be eight years later after this election: ([Prayers for a Thousand Years](#), edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, p. 295)

*May we as a nation...rediscover the sacred flame of our national heritage, which so many have given their lives to safeguard.*

*Let the wounds of separation and division be healed by opening our hearts to listen to the truth on all sides, allowing us to find a higher truth that includes us all.*

*May we learn to honor and enjoy our diversity and differences as a people, even as we more deeply touch our fundamental unity.*

*May we as a people undergo a transformation that will draw forth individuals to lead our nation who embody courage, compassion, and a higher vision.*

*May our leaders inspire us, and we so inspire each other with our potential that a new spirit of forgiveness, caring, and honesty be born in our nation.*

*May we as a united people move with clear, directed purpose to take our place within the community of nations and help build a better future for all humanity.*

*May we as a nation rededicate ourselves to truly living as one nation....., indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

May we at this Thanksgiving table so inspire each other with our potential that a new spirit of forgiveness, caring, and honesty might be born within our hearts and find its way into our lives. May *we* within this room.....

Back at my own Thanksgiving table once again, I think about the now headless Pilgrim candles that I saved from last year's Thanksgiving meal and have put on this year's table as part of the centerpiece – and I am thankful for my friend Mary who brought them to us in their original Puritan and entire form. I'm also thankful for the silliness and laughter they brought to the occasion, along with the very ancient chocolate filled wax turkeys that were my grandmother's and that I can't bear to get rid of even though they are starting (just starting? After nearly 80 years?) to lose their now crumbling and powdered innards. And I am thankful for tradition, both old and new.

Every platter, every one of my collection of champagne flutes with its unique history, every wax turkey and pine cone, every moment spent clipping snips of White Pine and Hemlock and dried Astilbe flowers from the garden to tuck into the table-long centerpieces – for all of these I am thankful.

These are but a few of the strange but true thoughts I had as we ate our way through a Thanksgiving meal Grandma Toots would have been proud of. I am thankful for all that is my life – its present and its past. Not all of what is in the past brings happy memories, but there is a certain peace that comes with the acceptance of it as “my” life. Peace starts from within, we sang earlier. “Let it begin with me.” We are not Arg and Tharg; we are human beings and we *do* know how to get along with each other.

In my musings may you have been reminded of some of your own thoughts this holiday. If you were not with family, not with friends, alone perhaps, I hope you nevertheless had your own thankful moments. If you were alone and did not choose to be alone, I am sorry and hope new doorways will soon appear in your life. It is good that you are here today.

Being thankful for the live people in the room at holiday feasts with family or friends is important. Personally I think getting along is only a small thing – life is too short to add any more pain to our relationships. Being appreciative of diversity at the table is honorably inclusive – and absolutely crucial in our world today. Being thankful for all the other invisible people in the room, the one holding the antique cranberry bowl for example, is even more inclusive.

There is one more thing for which I am very thankful this Thanksgiving, and every day – you.

Blessed be.