

Thanks for the Memories

Reflection for All Souls Thanksgiving Service
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Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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I know from emails I sometime get from Mary Strieff trying to find an image for the website to go with my sermon that the titles I chose can be a bit mysterious, making it hard to pin down what I plan to address. That's on purpose. Both for you and for me. For one, it hopefully keeps you interested and secondly, it leaves me some wiggle room if a sermon goes off in a direction I hadn't anticipated before writing it. With that being said, a word about this morning's sermon title, "Thanks for the Memories". First, don't panic. This is not a farewell sermon. I hope that doesn't disappoint anyone. Instead the title reflects the fact that I chose not to give an All Souls service in the beginning of the month because I felt the need to give a pre-election sermon. And so this morning, given that both All Souls Day and Thanksgiving surface memories, often bittersweet, but that we are nonetheless grateful to hold, I offer you what I consider to be an All Souls Thanksgiving sermon.

So, it's November 24th and we're about midway into that period in American life we pass through each year that stretches from early October to late December, a period in which we celebrate three culturally significant, but historically dubious, myths. I am speaking of course about Columbus Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas -the last of which, while not an American holiday, is arguably one of the most culturally influential religious holidays celebrated in the United States.

Now, traditionally, a myth is simply a story that points to or is employed to convey a deeper than literal truth. This is why we still study the world's mythologies and why religious stories endure and continue to instruct and inspire people to this day. However sometimes the story itself is taken as the truth to be conveyed or is used to mask a complicated or less admirable historical reality.

We see this with the Christmas story where the pursuit of spiritual truth is too often abandoned in favor of defending or refuting the literal accuracy of the story's details. And we know Columbus neither discovered America-there was already a native population here- nor was he even the first European explorer to reach the Americas. As for Thanksgiving, well, it turns out the Thanksgiving story

those of us over a certain age grew up with is more revisionist than actual history, obscuring a painful and unjust legacy of occupation and oppression. So what are we to do in such cases? Well, rather than abandon myth altogether, we might grow in our awareness that sometimes we need to take a closer look at how we engage myth and the impact our engagement has on the truth it contains, that we may again, to borrow a Navajo phrase, “walk in beauty” that is, in harmony or right relationship with all.

Thanksgiving Day is only four days away. And justice demands we acknowledge that the traditional retelling of the story obscures a tragic legacy of injustice perpetrated against indigenous peoples. But the origin of the holiday isn’t the only story connected to the Thanksgiving myth needing our attention.

Indeed, perhaps even more present in the minds of many than the story of Thanksgiving’s origin is another myth about family. Thanksgiving is, after all, traditionally one of the busiest travel days of the year, when family, given and/or chosen, some of whom we may only see once a year, gather from far and wide to be together. A part of the Thanksgiving myth that only a few years ago Covid-19 disrupted on a scale rarely encountered in most of our lifetimes and this year an election result may disrupt for more than we realize. Of course, every year and for various reasons, people find themselves unable or unwilling to engage the Thanksgiving myth around family the way they once did or would like to.

Undoubtedly those kept apart by illness or great distance may utilize Zoom, Facetime or some other similar technology to connect with those whom they can’t be with physically this year, but there’s another way we can always engage regardless of whether or not we have an internet or phone connection, and that is via gratitude.

Writing on gratitude, the poet David Whyte states, “Thankfulness finds its full measure in generosity of presence, both through participation and witness.”

Presence here doesn’t mean physical closeness, but refers instead to showing up and giving life our full attention. Gratitude then, according to Whyte, concerns not so much recognizing and appreciating something we receive but rather, that we and others are... or as he writes, “that we are miraculously part of something, rather than nothing. “Even”, he notes, “if that something is temporarily pain or despair....”

And indeed, rare it seems, even in years uninterrupted by pandemics or polarizing elections, is a Thanksgiving that we’re not met by some degree of

pain. A familiar blend of joy, melancholy, and nostalgia, that seems to accompany every holiday. The exact proportions of which depends on any number of life events..births, deaths, marriage, divorce, graduations, and, of course, the simple passage of time.

Behind all of these life events are people. People as varied as the flowers, fruits and vegetables to which they are likened in Max Coots beloved Thanksgiving poem and are described as feisty, generous, crotchety, gorgeous, silly and so forth. Similarly, Maya Angelou, in her poem "Human Family", reminds us of the many diversities of human beings, noting what she calls, "obvious differences" in temperament, skin color, and life philosophy. Both Coots' whimsical comparisons and Angelou's straight forward enumeration of human difference teach us something essential to gratitude: paying attention. As David Whyte observes, "gratitude arises from paying attention, from being awake in the presence of everything that lives within and without us."

One of the things that lives within us are memories. Which need not be a perfectly accurate record of what or whomever is remembered to have meaning for us. There are people, even pets, who may not be with us or around our table on Thanksgiving because of illness, breakups, separation, divorce, work, or because they or we can't travel this year. And there are others, as Max Coots writes, "now gone", who won't be there because they have died. Whatever the reason we can't be with them physically, we can, by being awake in the presence of their memory living within us, be with them in gratitude.

At this point I should tell you I'm not the only one who has been thinking about these things as Thanksgiving approaches. Our children, youth, and adults in Religious Exploration have been giving this some thought as well. Recently they were asked, "Who (person or pet) will you miss this year at Thanksgiving/Holidays?"

Here is how they responded...

Lennix responded he will miss his cousins and grandparents.

Viviana said, "I will miss my uncle and aunt and cousins all the way in Panama", adding, "We don't get to see them ever."

No one came to mind for Maeve and that's okay.

Jennifer said, "My family in Georgia."

And Penelope said, "I am going to miss my International Student friends."

Another, whose name didn't get to me in time this morning replied, "My aunt and uncle, my cousins and my friends."

And Molly shared, "I will miss (cat) Myrlie. Adding, "This will be my first Thanksgiving without her (she died in April). And I will miss my youngest brother. Very much alive but his schedule and my car issues will have us Zooming through part of the cooking on Thanksgiving rather than making the meal together."

With the simple act of remembering and naming those they will miss this holiday, Lennix, Viviana, Maeve, Jennifer, Penelope, and Molly demonstrate a practice of paying attention, of pausing to be present to the memories that live within us, memories that give rise to gratitude and connects us with those we're unable to be with as usual or as we'd like this year or forever more. Indeed, they remind us all that in the absence of our loved ones physical presence we can still be present to, and say thanks...thanks for the memories.

I invite you now to pause for a moment of silence to allow the thought or memory of someone you will miss this Thanksgiving to emerge, and if you feel so moved, gently speak their name aloud.

SILENCE

To those whose names we have spoken aloud or within the silent embrace of our hearts and minds we say, "Thanks for the memories."

With practice, as the years pass, gratitude, we learn, is restorative as well as sustaining. It is the harmonizing effect of paying attention, that, as David Whyte says, "shows we understand and are equal to the gifted nature of life." A profound realization that, as Maya Angelou reminds us and repeats in "Human Family", "We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike."

And indeed, it is so.
Amen and Blessed Be.