

FACING HISTORY

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Two weeks ago, at my ordination and installation service, many of you had the chance to meet my family. Not just my parents and brothers, but almost all of my aunts, uncles and cousins who live in New York and New Jersey came to help celebrate the event.

One carload arrived from Long Island, having stopped in Queens to pick up two of my aunts. When I walked outside to welcome them, my cousin Mary gave me a big hug, looked at me and said, “Are you sure you want all of your crazy family here? We might just scare your poor congregation.”

I assured her that I was, in fact, sure that I wanted them all there. In fact, I was thrilled to have so many of my family members here. But the truth is that some of the folks in my family are, well, odd. (I’m sure they feel the same way about me.)

I haven’t always agreed with them. Every now and then, I have blushed at things they’ve said in public. I’ve on occasion had to speak up to let them know that something they’ve done was, in my view, wrong.

And yet they are my family, and I love them dearly, and I would not have wanted them to miss my ordination and installation for anything.

And I was truly glad that the people I serve in this congregation had the chance to meet them, crazy or not. You see, they are a part of who I am. Though I am not entirely like any of them, they all had some hand in shaping who I’ve become today, and knowing that is important.

Perhaps you have a family something like this and you can understand where I’m coming from. Perhaps you have one or two family members that are not the first to pop into your head when you’re trying to be proud of your heritage.

I think it’s a part of the natural human process of development that at some point we need to assert our differences from our family of origin—at some point, we all seek to be seen as individuals. I think that most teenagers know the feeling of being embarrassed by something their parents have said or done.

And yet, I also think it’s important to make peace with our families of origin. To understand that they, like each of us, are imperfect people in an imperfect world. To embrace the good things from them that we have within us—and sometimes the not-so-good things that we also have within us.

We do this to understand and appreciate where we come from, and we share these things to be in better relationship with one another.

This is, fundamentally, how I, as a 21st-century Unitarian Universalist, approach Thanksgiving.

[Bibliographic note: The story told in the subsequent paragraphs is paraphrased and combined from several sources, including *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving*, by Catherine O'Neill Grace and Margaret M. Bruchac (National Geographic Society, 2004, and websites including First Parish Church in Plymouth (cms.plymouthuu.org), the website of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (www.wampanoagtribe.net), the website of the Plimoth Plantation (www.plimoth.org), and "A Not So Traditional Thanksgiving," found at the TeacherVision website (<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/thanksgiving/history/2558.html>). Direct quotes will be attributed.]

You see, the famous Pilgrims about whom Americans have woven such intricate myths, are the spiritual ancestors (if not the actual genetic ones) of Unitarian Universalists today. While our theology has come a long way since the days of Puritan colonists, it is not a matter of debate that the First Parish Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts, founded in 1620 by those who landed there on the Mayflower, is today Unitarian Universalist congregation. In fact, it has been an openly Unitarian congregation since 1800, during the time in which the earliest churches in New England began to adopt a Unitarian theology.

So those Pilgrims, whatever we think about them, are, in the metaphorical sense, our family. They might not have been as good as we like to think they were at this time of year. They might have, in fact, been downright nasty at times to the Native Americans whose land they claimed as their own. And yet, it is our duty today to face that history, and to understand how it led us to where we are today.

It would be easy for us to claim the popular story of Thanksgiving as part of our heritage. In that version, the deeply religious Pilgrims and the local native peoples feast together in an uncomplicated celebration.

The reality, however, is more complex. History always is.

For most of the last ten to twelve thousand years, the Wampanoag peoples and their ancestors have lived in what we now call southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, along the curved peninsula Europeans named Cape Cod, and on the islands of Nantucket and Noepe (which we know better as Martha's Vineyard).

By 1620, when the Pilgrims arrived on these shores, fleeing religious persecution in England and Holland, the Wampanoag had encountered Europeans a number of times. Though none had settled in those parts, English, Dutch and French traders and explorers had made their way through Wampanoag lands for decades, bringing both trade as well as conflict, diseases and fear.

Many of the Wampanoag knew the English only as people who would regularly kidnap their relatives and forcibly bring them to Europe as exhibits in traveling shows. This was not a good way to start a relationship.

When the Mayflower docked on November 11, 1620, blown off course on their way to the mouth of the Hudson River and needing a safe place to spend the winter, they found the Wampanoag village of Pauxet, abandoned because of mass deaths from a plague. They re-christened the village New Plymouth, and set about raiding the supplies that the Wampanoag in nearby villages had set aside for the winter.

These settlers believed that God had given them a bounty to help them survive—and not that they were stealing.

The winter was hard, and many of the new settlers did not survive. The next Spring, both the Abenaki people and the Wampanoag people sent representatives to the English settlers to begin to negotiate peace.

Tisquantum, a Wampanoag council member who had survived being kidnapped by Europeans (and thus who spoke English), agreed to live with the Pilgrims as a sort of ambassador.

The three-day harvest feast that followed months later was, in fact, part of those negotiations, a new discussion made necessary by the fact that the English were using firearms to hunt with—a technology that alarmed the Wampanoag.

The historians—both Euro-American and Wampanoag—at the Plimoth Plantation site in Massachusetts write of this feast the following:

“Although the gathering which took place between the English colonists and the Wampanoag in the autumn of 1621 in Patuxet/New Plymouth has become known as ‘The First Thanksgiving,’ it would not have been considered a thanksgiving by the people involved. Not only was it not a ‘thanksgiving,’ but also it was also not a ‘first!’ Native Peoples all over this continent have given daily thanks to their Creator for thousands of years. Likewise, celebrating days of thanksgiving was a familiar tradition for the Europeans who eventually colonized North America.” (www.plimoth.org)

The peace that was negotiated at that feast held for some twenty years—until the pressures brought about by swelling numbers of English colonists led them to declare war upon Native American nations of the region in order to control more land and resources.

It was not until much later that the story of Thanksgiving was born.

In 1820, in the first decades of American independence, another famous Unitarian, Daniel Webster, celebrated the bicentennial of the Pilgrims’ arrival at Plymouth. In his speech, given in First Parish Church, he said:

“We have come to this Rock, to record here our homage for our Pilgrim Fathers; our sympathy in their sufferings; our gratitude for their labors; our admiration of their virtues; our veneration of their piety...” (TeacherVision website, <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/thanksgiving/history/2558.html>)

This speech marked the beginning of a campaign to recognize the Pilgrims as something much more than a band of religious dissidents, something much more than imperfect humans in an imperfect relationship with the Natives of their claimed homeland. Webster and others sought to recognize the Pilgrims—despite the historical record—as the founders of the nation by then known as the United States of America.

Decades later, when Abraham Lincoln sought to engage the divided nation in an observance of gratitude and unity, the holiday of Thanksgiving was born. To give it importance in peoples’ lives, it was tied to those people by then seen as brave founders of the American colonies—the Pilgrims—and placed at a time of year to make it plausible that it really was a re-creation of the 1621 harvest feast.

Today, we know more. We are able to look at the historical record and understand that the story of Thanksgiving is not so accurate. We are able to look at the Pilgrims and see not only brave people seeking religious freedom but also our imperfect ancestors.

What, as the spiritual descendants of those Pilgrims, do we have to learn at Thanksgiving?

I think that first of all, it is up to us to tell the right story.

The story that is honest, in keeping with the historical record, and accountable to the descendants of those who were at that dinner in 1621.

Second, it is up to us to be honest about who our spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims, were. They had some great things going for them: they really and truly did come to these shores fleeing religious persecution in England and Holland. They really did try, after some time, to make peace with the Wampanoag and the Abenaki and other Native American nations that were here before they were.

And yet, they also saw themselves as fulfilling a mission of God. They believed they were better than those who were on these shores because theirs was the true religion. And despite their own persecution, they weren't particularly tolerant of other religious expressions—either Native American or European—that they encountered after landing here. Some time later, that even included the marginalization of Universalists, among other non-Establishment faiths.

Finally, as the spiritual descendants of those who came to these shores in 1620, we have an obligation to be honest about the role of the Congregationalists—and later their liberal splinter group, the Unitarians—in shaping what this country became. Both the good and the bad.

Historian Jill Lepore is quoted in an article discussing the modern lessons we can learn from the history of the Pilgrims and the myth of Thanksgiving:

“On the basic civic stage,” says Lepore, “it is our obligation to examine our American heritage in all its wonder and brutality. We have to find a way to acknowledge that both cultures—the Native Americans who lost their land and the Europeans who settled here— are constituent of what it is to be an American. We have inherited both those heritages. We can't claim just one.” (TeacherVision website, <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/thanksgiving/history/2558.html>)

The other day, I was discussing the role of Unitarians in the founding of America with my Tuesday night class. I'm thinking about offering a class beginning in January on Unitarian Universalist history, and one in particular focuses on the relationship of Unitarian and Universalist roots to the founding of our country.

Just as Daniel Webster did in 1820, though, if we seek to give something or some group of people legitimacy by staking their claim on the founding of America, we are on shaky ground.

Unitarians certainly were among the first leaders of our nation. In addition to Webster, the list of famous Unitarians includes the Adamses (John and John Quincy), Paul Revere, and, if we're talking theology (and not membership in a congregation), Thomas Jefferson.

It is true, also, that the American commitment to freedom—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly—is related directly to the Unitarian commitment to an ever-widening understanding of religious truth.

And though we know all too well that the founders of our nation didn't get everything just right, I think it's a beautiful thing that they created a nation in which new understandings of what was right and good were allowed to take hold over time.

It would have been nice (even if it is naïve to think it possible) if the founders of our nation understood slavery to be wrong or that women should have the right to vote, but nevertheless, they created a nation in which those things won the day eventually.

And so, to tie our religious history to this honorable story is tempting.

In my discussion last week, though, I was reminded of something I already knew—something it is easy to forget in a haze of patriotism and pride in my religious ancestors. I was reminded that the ideas on which this nation was founded were not necessarily those of the founders alone.

They had role models—Native American role models.

You see, the oldest living participatory democracy on this Earth is not the representative government of the United States, it is instead the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, known to most of us as the Iroquois Confederacy. (http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/)

And, in a part not usually told in the stories of the American democracy, when American independence was being debated in June of 1776, representatives of the Haudenosaunee were invited to talk with the Continental Congress. (Ibid.)

While the extent of Native American influence on the framers of the United States Constitution remains a hotly-debated topic among historians, the United States government recognizes that Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson had considerable contact with Haudenosaunee leaders in the time just before and after American independence.

Smithsonian magazine writes that Franklin “‘recognized that the Iroquois constitution contained many features absent in other governments at the time,’ including the concept that ‘elected officials were never masters but remained servants of their constituencies.’” (<http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/Archive/2005/May/17-246412.html>)

It is interesting that the State Department’s article about this also notes that there was one area in which the American framers were not influenced by the Haudenosaunee: the Iroquois Confederacy has always recognized the political rights of women.

It is up to us, as the spiritual ancestors of both the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers of the United States, to tell the story accurately. None of this takes away from the good things that both groups managed to accomplish.

Rather, in facing our history with an eye towards truth and the tools of reason, we are left with the stories of human beings. Imperfect human beings.

Rather than larger-than-life mythical figures, we are the descendants of groups of people who had some good ideas, some misguided quirks, and more than a few moments that are embarrassing to us in hindsight.

And that’s exactly whom we want to be related to, isn’t it? Let’s make sure they’re the folks whose stories show up at our next feast.