

A BLUEPRINT FOR THE WORLD

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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As many of you know, Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday — not because it's such an extraordinary event, but for precisely the opposite reason. Thanksgiving invites us to celebrate the stuff of everyday life: family and friends, shelter and sustenance, and most of all, the harvest. At its best, Thanksgiving is a festival of gratitude. If Unitarian Universalists are the gratitude people, as I believe we are, then Thanksgiving is our holiday.

During the winter of 1621, more than half of the hundred-plus settlers in the Plymouth colony had succumbed to disease and the cold, sometimes dying at the rate of two or three a day. But over the following summer, the growing season had been generous; and the settlers had confidence that they would bury fewer of their number during the winter to come. Remembering their sons and daughters and parents and friends who had died, the settlers gathered on what eventually would come to be called the first Thanksgiving to give thanks for an ample harvest.

There may well have been some Native Americans at this potluck meal, which probably included game, wild fowl, and fish, as well as corn, beans, and squash, along with wild nuts and berries. Like many Thanksgiving scenes today, however, there were tensions around the table. The Native Americans at Plymouth didn't know how tragically their interactions with the settlers would eventually turn out. But they knew enough to be wary, which is why the harvest meal probably wasn't the celebration of friendliness depicted by Jennie Augusta Brownscombe in her iconic but misleading 1914 painting of the so-called first Thanksgiving.

Rather, the scene revealed two weaknesses leaning into a strength. The settlers had been weakened by disease and starvation, and the Wampanoag had also been weakened by disease and by their losing battle against the Narragansett. Given their bleak circumstances, the settlers and the Wampanoag realized that together they would be somewhat less weak than each would be alone.

This is why Pocahontas may be the quintessential — if not the first — authentically American hero. She symbolizes the belief in a common destiny. The daughter of Powhatan, a powerful intertribal leader in the Chesapeake Bay region during the early 1600s, Pocahontas helped maintain peace between the English colonists and the Native Americans by befriending the settlers at Jamestown, Virginia, and eventually marrying one of them, a man named John Rolfe. But her place in American history was sealed by another act, both more dramatic and more courageous.

According to an account written by Captain John Smith, the founder and leader of the colony, relations between the settlers and the Native Americans had deteriorated to the point that Smith himself was taken prisoner and sentenced to die. As the story goes, just as Smith placed his head on the sacrificial stone to await death, Pocahontas supposedly flung herself down and, embracing the captain's head, successfully implored her father to spare him.

So where is Pocahontas when you need her? Our belief that the inhabitants of this land share a common destiny seems to have gone missing. According to today's conventional wisdom, America is more viciously tribal than it has ever been. A recent report commissioned by the organization More in Common describes our nation as currently made up of seven political tribes. See if you can find yourself in one of them.

According to the report, Progressive Activists are young, highly engaged, secular, cosmopolitan, and angry; Traditional Liberals are older, retired, open to compromise, rational, and cautious; Passive Liberals are unhappy, insecure, distrustful, and disillusioned; the Politically Disengaged are young, low income, distrustful, detached, patriotic, and conspiratorial; Moderates are engaged, civic-minded, middle-of-the-road, pessimistic, and Protestant; Traditional Conservatives are religious, middle class, patriotic, and moralistic; and Devoted Conservatives are white, retired, highly engaged, uncompromising, and patriotic.

If you are a typical American, the report goes on to say, you are highly confident that your tribe is the one true tribe. Which is why most Americans don't seem interested in sitting down at the table with anyone else – and especially not at Thanksgiving.

Jonathan Haidt, who teaches moral psychology at NYU and has written a book titled *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, among several other books, sees our tribal divisions somewhat differently. He disagrees with the view that liberals are open-minded and conservatives are close-minded. Both are both, he says. It's just that liberals tend to be closed-minded about things that conservatives tend to be open-minded about, and vice-versa.

Haidt offers another explanation of the divisive forces at work today. He describes a tension between centripetal social forces, which hold things together, and centrifugal social forces, which push them apart. Imagine three children running around a pole while linking their arms, he says, with the innermost child holding onto the pole. The faster the children run, the more the centrifugal force threatens to pull them apart. The tighter the children grip each other, the more centripetal force there is holding them together. If the centrifugal force exceeds the centripetal force, the chain of children breaks.

In Haidt's view, the centrifugal forces now pulling America apart – among them the loss of the common enemies we had in World War II and the Cold War, an increasingly fragmented and polarized media, the radicalization of the Republican Party, and a new form of identity politics based on individual rather than collective identity – these threaten to overwhelm the centripetal forces that have previously held

us together, such as faith, family, and a relatively homogenous view of our values and destiny as a nation. The key to the strength of the human chain holding us together, he says, lies in the points of connection. If the ties that link us to the people next to us are strong, then we will hold together as a nation. If those ties fail, then we will fall apart.

In other words, how we treat the people around us matters – especially if they are different from us. Indeed, our nation turns out to be strongest when people lean on each other not because they have a lot in common, but despite the fact that they don't, much like some Native Americans and settlers in the early days. The language of Thanksgiving is the language of reciprocity. We need each other, because we are all in this – this day, this nation, this world, this life – together.

Robin Wall Kimmerer emphasizes this point in her beautifully-written book titled *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. A member of the Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer is a scientist and TED Talk star who teaches environmental biology at SUNY in Syracuse, where she is founding Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.

In her book, Kimmerer says that the language of science “can be a language of distance, which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects.” The language of plants and animals, in contrast, is a language of relationship and reciprocity. “Cultures of gratitude,” she adds, “must also be cultures of reciprocity.”

Kimmerer illustrates this principle by describing the relationship among the plants described by native peoples as The Three Sisters: corn, beans, and squash. Three seeds are planted together in May on a small mound: one corn seed, one bean seed, and one squash seed. The corn is the first to emerge from the ground, growing straight and stiff – “a stem with a lofty goal,” as Kimmerer puts it.

The bean shoot emerges next. It focuses on leaf growth while the corn concentrates on height. When the corn is knee high, the bean extends itself into a long vine, “a slender green string with a mission,” Kimmerer says. The tip of the bean vine travels up to a meter a day, until it finds a corn stem or some other vertical support, then up it climbs. Meanwhile, the squash, the latest bloomer of the Three Sisters, steadily extends itself horizontally, covering the ground to defend against weeds.

“At the height of the summer,” Kimmerer says, “when the days are long and bright, and the thunderers come to soak the ground, the lessons of reciprocity are written clearly in a Three Sisters garden. Together their stems inscribe what looks to me like a blueprint for the world, a map of balance and harmony. The corn stands eight feet tall; rippling green ribbons of leaf curl away from the stem in every direction to catch the sun. No leaf sits directly over the next, so that each can gather light without shading the others. The bean twines around the corn stalk, weaving itself between the leaves of corn, never interfering with their work. In the spaces where corn leaves are not, buds appear on the vining bean and expand into outstretched leaves and clusters of fragrant flowers. The bean leaves droop and are held close to the stem of the corn. Spread around the feet of the corn and beans is a carpet of big broad squash leaves that intercept the light that

falls among the pillars of corn. Their layered spacing uses the light, a gift from the sun, efficiently, with no waste. The organic symmetry of forms belongs together; the placement of every leaf, the harmony of shapes speak their message. Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others, and there will be enough for all.”

The Native Americans who joined the settlers for a potluck harvest meal in 1621, bearing their gifts of corn, beans, and squash, may have set aside their qualms about the settlers in order to honor the harmony of the harvest. If so, they tragically came to be disappointed by the settlers, who never learned the lesson of the Three Sisters. Indeed, Kimmerer says, “When the colonists on the Massachusetts shore first saw indigenous gardens, they inferred that the savages did not know how to farm. To their minds, a garden meant straight rows of single species, not a three-dimensional sprawl of abundance. And yet they ate their fill and asked for more, and more again.”

My sense is that we, as a national amalgam of natives and settlers, willing immigrants and indentured slaves, and their children and their children’s children – we haven’t yet collectively learned the lesson of the Three Sisters either. But it’s Thanksgiving, and it’s almost time for dinner. The corn, beans, and squash will show up once again to teach us. The Three Sisters will show the way.

Hold fast to those who are near to you, especially if you and they have little in common. Respect one another. Support one another. Bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others. If we do, there will be enough for all. A culture of gratitude begins by being a culture of reciprocity. It’s a blueprint for the world.

Kimmerer concludes, “The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others... In reciprocity, we fill our spirits as well as our bellies.”