

AROUND THE TABLE

A homily for Thanksgiving Sunday by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
November 24, 2017

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, friends, shelter, and the harvest. At its best, Thanksgiving is a festival of gratitude. If Unitarian Universalists are the gratitude people, as I believe we should be, then Thanksgiving is our holiday.

The story that gets told about the first Thanksgiving may be historically fanciful, but it's no less compelling for being partially a product of human imagination. As the story goes, during the winter of 1621, more than half of the hundred-plus settlers in the Plymouth colony had succumbed to disease and 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 came to be called the first Thanksgiving to give thanks.

The actual story of the first Thanksgiving is more complicated than that, of course. It's true that the first settlers from Europe worked hard to make this land their home. They fought for it, and many of them died for it. But theft of land from Native Americans was also commonplace, as was the enslavement of non-Europeans, especially those violently shackled and brought here from Africa against their will, a devastation that began 400 years ago in 1619.

Despite these horrors, over time we began to develop a sense of ourselves as a nation — all of us together. As John Steinbeck once put it, “we became more alike than we were different — a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness, *E Pluribus Unum*”: from many, one.

It's a compelling idea, no less compelling for being wholly a product of human imagination. One nation of many peoples. One dream from many hopes. One goal from many labors. Imagination beget conviction, and thus the world of human experience has been transformed.

The ability to rally around collectively-imagined convictions has turned out to be the signal genius of the human race. In his book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, the historian Yuval Noah Harari explains that groups bonded only by informal social networks can reach a maximum size of about 150 individuals. Once a group gets larger than 150, people won't know everyone else in the group well enough to unite around personal relationships. In order to grow larger, and especially

exponentially larger, a group requires a means whereby people who don't know each other can share common commitments. As Harari poses the question, "How did Homo sapiens manage to cross this critical threshold, eventually founding cities comprising tens of thousands of inhabitants and empires ruling hundreds of millions?"

The answer, Harari goes on to say, lies in the unique ability of Homo sapiens to imagine into being things that wouldn't otherwise exist in the physical world. "Any large-scale human cooperation," he says, "whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common [ideas] that exist only in people's collective imagination."

For example, he says, "Two lawyers who have never met can nevertheless combine efforts to defend a complete stranger because they both believe in the existence of laws, justice, human rights – and the money paid out in fees." Yet none of these things exist outside the ideas people generate and the commitments they make. He concludes, "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings."

To make his point clearer, Harari compares Homo sapiens to chimpanzees, our close genetic relatives. He notes that individually we are highly similar to chimpanzees (our DNA is 98.8% the same). But in large numbers, the differences between Homo sapiens and chimpanzees are astounding.

He says, "If you tried to bunch together thousands of chimpanzees into Tiananmen Square, Wall Street, the Vatican or the headquarters of the United Nations, the result would be pandemonium. By contrast, Sapiens regularly gather by the thousands in such places. Together, they create orderly patterns – such as trade networks, mass celebrations and political institutions – that they could never have created in isolation. The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the [imaginative] glue that binds together large numbers of individuals, families and groups. This glue has made us the masters of creation."

We are bound together by the stories we tell about who we are and why we are here. The story of how All Souls developed over the past 200 years is one of those stories, as is the story of how our nation developed over the past 500 years. These stories are no less compelling, and no less effective, for mainly being a product of our collective imagination. The story of Thanksgiving is also one of those stories. It gives us each a place around the table of our common humanity.

The Native American poet Joy Harjo, who currently serves as Poet Laureate of the United States, wrote the magnificent poem, "For Calling The Spirit Back From Wandering The Earth In Its Human Feet" that serves as the through-line of our worship this morning. She captures the idea of a common table in another of her poems, "Perhaps the World Ends Here." In her imagination, the common table is not a picnic table or even a dining room table, but a kitchen table.

She writes, in part:

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women...

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

In this poem, Harjo updates the fanciful elements of the first Thanksgiving dinner in a useful way. She doesn't sentimentalize the gathering. We must eat to live, she says, identifying an elemental reality that illustrates how fully we depend on the plants and animals that make up the natural world around us.

Our humanity also depends upon other human beings. The hands of others welcome us at birth and bless us in death. We learn what it means to be human from those who nurture us in infancy and instruct us during childhood. Experiences of joy get multiplied as we share them with others, and experiences of sorrow get divided. We suffer together and give thanks together.

To put the same insight into Harari's terms, *Homo sapiens* have become masters of creation only because we are able to unite around the idea of a common humanity and a shared destiny. At Thanksgiving, as we join hands and hearts with others around the table of our common humanity, the idea of a shared destiny becomes fact. We partake of the bounty of this good Earth — a bounty that has been provided to us mainly by people we will never know. In giving thanks, we acknowledge once again that we're all in this together.

Thanksgiving is a festival of gratitude — for the natural world that sustains us, for the people who love us, and for the common convictions that inspire us. Around whatever table you gather this Thanksgiving, my hope is that you will take in all this holiday has to offer — all the bountiful goodness of it.