

Thanksgiving and the spirituality of gratitude

BY THE REV. DR. KHARMA R. AMOS

Spirit of Life

Next week, we celebrate Thanksgiving in the United States. Because of our shameful history of colonialism, this is a complicated holiday to celebrate. There is a reason that some members of the Wampanoag Nation mark Thanksgiving as a National Day of Mourning.

Too many retellings of “the First Thanksgiving” story gloss over the trauma and tragedy that Native peoples experienced when they were murdered, sold into indentured servitude, forced into religious conversions and robbed of their lands and languages (among other things). I applaud those who include a more truthful telling of the origin stories of the United States in their Thanksgiving celebrations. It is a history with which we need to reckon and which ought to motivate us to live differently — in harmony with our fellow humans and the Earth we all call home.

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It is important to acknowledge this history before we move on to explore other aspects of Thanksgiving that are also worthy of our attention. For example, the spiritual practice of gratitude is a valuable one for us to learn and incorporate in the fullness of our lives. Yet, if we do so during this holiday without grounding it in a more accurate story of our origins, we might be guilty of turning Thanksgiving into a “gooey overlay of sweetness over genocide.” This was a danger Mah-towin Munro, a Lakota and co-leader of United American Indians of New England, wisely cautioned non-native people to avoid.

Perhaps we could approach this complicated holiday with a BOTH/AND?

Let’s not throw the baby of thanksgiving out with the bathwater of colonialism. That means we must tell the truth about the atrocious things that were/are done to the original inhabitants of the land we now call the United



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States of America. AND there is always value in focusing our energies on thanksgiving for the abundance of the Earth, the gift of life, loving relationships and the chances we are given again and again to do and be better.

It is often against the backdrop of life’s difficulties that the extraordinary value of “the little things” we might normally overlook becomes clear. This year may have more of both — difficulties and valuable little things that make life worth living. Thanksgiving provides us with an opportunity to be honest about all of it — the good, the bad and the ugly — and to intentionally practice a spirituality of gratitude. We may

not be thankful for all of it, but if we can focus on the parts of life for which we are grateful, our lives will be enhanced.

I wonder what is giving you life right now? When you take in your surroundings, what/whom do you notice that makes your life a little better or easier? When you look inward, to your heart of hearts, what treasures do you find? In the living of your days — all the doing, eating, driving, running, walking, singing, shopping, working, playing, sleeping, cooking, cleaning, petting, riding, feeding, holding, loving — what are you glad you are able to do? Perhaps this Thanksgiving is a good time to make a list of all that fills you with gratitude and literally give thanks (i.e., send a card, say a prayer, give a hug, text, drop by with a flower or find another creative way to say “Thanks — it mattered”). May the gratitude we cultivate in this season become our practice every day, all year.

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