

- ✓ Article on Thanksgiving
- ✓ Calendar of Events
- ✓ Calendar of upcoming Events
- ✓ IMYM Queries

Deconstructing the Myths of “The First Thanksgiving”

by Judy Dow (Abenaki) and Beverly Slapin

What is it about the story of “The First Thanksgiving” that makes it essential to be taught in virtually every grade from preschool through high school? What is it about the story that is so seductive? Why has it become an annual elementary school tradition to hold Thanksgiving pageants, with young children dressing up in paper-bag costumes and feather-duster headdresses and marching around the schoolyard? Why is it seen as necessary for fake “pilgrims” and fake “Indians” (portrayed by real children, many of whom are Indian) to sit down every year to a fake feast, acting out fake scenarios and reciting fake dialogue about friendship? And why do teachers all over the country continue (for the most part, unknowingly) to perpetuate this myth year after year after year?

Is it because as Americans we have a deep need to believe that the soil we live on and the country on which it is based was founded on integrity and cooperation? This belief would help contradict any feelings of guilt that could haunt us when we look at our role in more recent history in dealing with other indigenous peoples in other countries. If we dare to give up the “myth” we may have to take responsibility for our actions both concerning indigenous peoples of this land as well as those brought to this land in violation of everything that makes us human. The realization of these truths untold might crumble the foundation of what many believe is a true democracy. As good people, can we be strong enough to learn the truths of our collective past? Can we learn from our mistakes? This would be our hope.

Myth #1: “The First Thanksgiving” occurred in 1621.

Fact: No one knows when the “first” thanksgiving occurred. People have been giving thanks for as long as people have existed. Indigenous nations all over the world have celebrations of the harvest that come from very old traditions; for Native peoples, thanksgiving comes not once a year, but every day, for all the gifts of life. To refer to the harvest feast of 1621 as “The First Thanksgiving” disappears Indian peoples in the eyes of non-Native children.

Myth #2: The people who came across the ocean on the Mayflower were called Pilgrims.

Fact: The Plimoth settlers did not refer to themselves as “Pilgrims.” Pilgrims are people who travel for religious reasons, such as Muslims who make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Most

of those who arrived here from England were religious dissidents who had broken away from the Church of England. They called themselves “Saints”; others called them “Separatists.” Some of the settlers were “Puritans,” dissidents but not separatists who wanted to “purify” the Church. It wasn’t until around the time of the American Revolution that the name “Pilgrims” came to be associated with the Plimoth settlers, and the “Pilgrims” became the symbol of American morality and Christian faith, fortitude, and family. (1)

Myth #3: The colonists came seeking freedom of religion in a new land.

Fact: The colonists were not just innocent refugees from religious persecution. By 1620, hundreds of Native people had already been to England and back, most as captives; so the Plimoth colonists knew full well that the land they were settling on was inhabited. Nevertheless, their belief system taught them that any land that was “unimproved” was “wild” and theirs for the taking; that the people who lived there were roving heathens with no right to the land. Both the Separatists and Puritans were rigid fundamentalists who came here fully intending to take the land away from its Native inhabitants and establish a new nation, their “Holy Kingdom.” The Plimoth colonists were never concerned with “freedom of religion” for anyone but themselves. (2)

Myth #4: When the “Pilgrims” landed, they first stepped foot on “Plymouth Rock.”

Fact: When the colonists landed, they sought out a sandy inlet in which to beach the little shallop that carried them from the Mayflower to the mainland. This shallop would have been smashed to smithereens had they docked at a rock, especially a Rock. Although the Plimoth settlers built their homes just up the hill from the Rock, William Bradford in *Mourt’s Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, does not even mention the Rock; writing only that they “unshipped our shallop and drew her on land.” (3) The actual “rock” is a slab of Dedham granodiorite placed there by a receding glacier some 20,000 years ago. It was first referred to in a town surveying record in 1715, almost 100 years after the landing. Since then, the Rock has been moved, cracked in two, pasted together, carved up, chipped apart by tourists, cracked again, and now rests as a memorial to something that never happened. (4)

It’s quite possible that the myth about the “Pilgrims” landing on a “Rock” originated as a reference to the New Testament of the Christian bible, in which Jesus says to Peter, “And I say also unto thee, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church and the Gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) The appeal to these scriptures gives credence to the sanctity of colonization and the divine destiny of the dominant culture. Although the colonists were not dominant then, they behaved as though they were.

Myth #5: The Pilgrims found corn.

Fact: Just a few days after landing, a party of about 16 settlers led by Captain Myles Standish followed a Nauset trail and came upon an iron kettle and a cache of Indian corn

buried in the sand. They made off with the corn and returned a few days later with reinforcements. This larger group “found” a larger store of corn, about ten bushels, and took it. They also “found” several graves, and, according to Mourt’s Relation, “brought sundry of the prettiest things away” from a child’s grave and then covered up the corpse. They also “found” two Indian dwellings and “some of the best things we took away with us.” (5) There is no record that restitution was ever made for the stolen corn, and the Wampanoag did not soon forget the colonists’ ransacking of Indian graves. (6)

The biggest myth Thanksgiving is a happy time.

Fact: For many Indian people, “Thanksgiving” is a time of mourning, of remembering how a gift of generosity was rewarded by theft of land and seed corn, extermination of many from disease and gun, and near total destruction of many more from forced assimilation. As currently celebrated in this country, “Thanksgiving” is a bitter reminder of 500 years of betrayal returned for friendship.

SLMM Calendar Events

November 30 Meeting for Worship

December 3 12 Noon Conflict Resolution Meeting

December 5 and 6th Quaker Institute for the Future Board Meeting

Dates to put on your Calendar

1. Second annual Winter Conference
February 13 & 14, 2009
University of Utah
sponsored by the Healthy Planet Mobilization Committee
2. I have secured plans for our annual fundraiser/concert.
It will be held on Friday night, March 27, 09.
We will have a concert, a silent auction and food, (as before).

Please mark it on your calendars.

Thanks,
Kate MacLeod

3. NATIONAL HOMELESS PERSONS MEMORIAL A candlelight vigil to remember those who died homeless this year. **December 22, 2008 5:30-6:30 P.M. Pioneer Park, Salt Lake City**

IMYM Queries

Greetings to Friends in all the Monthly Meetings of Intermountain Yearly Meeting:

We are pleased to send this fall letter with queries we want to lay before Friends for

discussion and discernment in your Meetings and Worship Groups.

We ask that Meetings share these queries in whatever ways work best in your local setting and prepare responses to be reviewed at the Continuing Committee meeting that will be held at Tempe this coming January 9, 10 and 11. We know that it can sometimes be a challenge for Monthly Meetings to find effective ways to give full and informed consideration to these queries, although over the years your Meeting has probably adopted a traditional method of doing so. It is not necessary to come to unity in a formal minute-- it is often more helpful to Continuing Committee or the Yearly Meeting Business Sessions if a summary of the range of ideas and responses from within each Meeting can be shared fully and then considered in the light of the Spirit. Even though one of the queries concerns IMYM or the Annual Gathering, others are of interest to Friends who seldom attend the Gathering and may know little about IMYM. Continuing Committee can profit from their responses as well. Meeting responses should be sent to Rand Hirschi by e-mail at rhirschi@xmission.com before Christmas if at all possible, but in all events, by January 2.

QUERIES

I. Drugs, Alcohol and Addiction.

Introductory Statement

An unhappy incident at our Annual Gathering at Ghost Ranch last summer brought questions of Friends' use of alcohol and drugs to the attention of many in attendance there. After a powerful Meeting for Listening at Yearly Meeting and another deep sharing at Executive Committee we feel the need to continue our exploration as a Yearly Meeting of our relationship to drugs and alcohol both in our own lives and in the policies and rules we promote at our gatherings.

Friends have long counseled moderation or abstinence in the use of alcohol and other addictive substances. It is a rare person who has not been affected by the addictive use of drugs or alcohol, either through personal use or through the addiction of a spouse, parent, sibling or child, a friend, a fellow worker, or, tragically, an intoxicated stranger in a car or on a street.

At the same time, many friends use alcohol moderately in ways that may benefit their physical and emotional health, or prudently use drugs. As Friend T. Edmund Harvey said in 1931,

The world is a dark enough place still for too many. It can ill spare even the poorest rushlight candle of cheerfulness or the smallest fire of fellowship. We must not put out the glimmer of light which shines for so many still today through the tavern windows, unless we can put a better in its place. We need the light of a brighter cheerfulness, and the glow of a warmer fellowship.

Query Number 1. What are the beliefs and experiences of Friends in your

Meeting concerning the proper place of alcohol or drug use in the home, in gatherings of Friends, or in everyday life? What benefits do Friends find from alcohol use? Could we be comfortable requesting that alcohol use be avoided at gatherings of Friends? Might friends be concerned that at gatherings the use of alcohol and "soft" recreational, but illicit, drugs might create a distance from Friends who for reasons of alcoholism or for other reasons do not drink or use recreational drugs? How does our adult use of mind-changing and mood-altering substances affect our ability to model and guide our children and young adults in these matters? Does the use of such substances affect communion among us and with the light of the spirit?

Query Number 2. Insofar as you have experience with the Annual Gathering at Ghost Ranch, have the registration materials adequately emphasized the "no illicit drugs" policy that applies to the gathering and all visitors at Ghost Ranch? Is there enough of a problem with substance use that any additional efforts or policies are warranted? If so, what would you suggest?

II. Spiritual story telling and storytellers.

Story Telling Query: The theme of IMYM's June 2009 gathering at Ghost Ranch will be telling our spiritual stories. Lucy Duncan, our guest speaker, will lead an early days workshop to help Friends prepare stories to tell as part of the plenary session. We would like to know if there are Friends in our Yearly Meeting we might encourage to participate in preparing a story to tell. In other words, are there Friends whose spiritual stories you would particularly like to hear or Friends who would particularly like to learn to tell their story, including stories directed especially to children? If so, send us their name(s). Participants will require no advance preparation before the gathering, but we will be in touch to ask if they are interested.

P.S. Please remember the separate Queries distributed a few weeks ago concerning the future of the Joint Service Project (now Western Quaker Work Camps). Send your response to these to Rand Hirschi as well: rhirschi@xmission.com.

Mike Tapp's blog <http://georgebenjamin.blogspot.com/>

Thanksgiving Myths