Blessing the world: A Thanksgiving Cider Communion
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
November 22, 2009

What is it that we are thankful for? Thanksgiving is a national holiday in the US because it was proclaimed such by George Washington, but the idea of having a celebration for the Autumn Harvest is as old as agriculture itself. Today, when we can get watermelons and blueberries from Chile, when we can have lamb and shrimp and kiwi any time we want it in our supermarkets, it is hard to realize that for most of human history, eating was seasonal and sporadic.

My colleague Rali Weaver of Dedham notes, "Americans aren't the only people to have a festival giving thanks for the harvest. Hindus have Onam. The Ashanti tribe in West Africa celebrates the festival of Yams. The Chinese have the Harvest Moon festival which takes place on the 15th day of the 8th moon of the lunar calendar, when the ancient Chinese felt the moon was fullest. And Jewish families have long since celebrated Sukkot (Sukkah) the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Ingathering, paying tribute to the bountiful earth.[1]"

So our ancestors were in pretty good company in celebrating the harvest with rituals of thanksgiving. Behind the official proclamation going back to George Washington, Americans have also had this founding myth for the holidays, which has to do with the first Pilgrim settlers and the Wampanoags in the year 1621. I want to try to come to terms with this myth in the next few minutes here. An artistic imagining of the scene is on the front cover of your order of service. People always look at the past through the lens of the present, and over the years white Americans have tended to embellish the story of this First Thanksgiving with details borrowed from our later customs. We don't know that there were cranberries, yams, rice or pumpkins.

If we go on the website of Plimouth Plantation, we can get a fair reading of what we do know for sure about that encounter in 1621. From the settlers side, we have a letter written by one Edward Winslow, who was later governor of the Plymouth colony, to a friend back in England. On the Native American side, we have oral traditions of the Wampanoags.

Here is what Winslow wrote:

> "Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, among other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming among us, and among the rest their greatest king, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted; and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation, and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

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[1] "Generosity and Gratitude" sermon at First Church and Parish, Dedham http://www.raliweaver.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/Generosityandgratitude.332140934.htm

And that is the sum total of the historical record, within the European-American culture, of the event. Notice that the celebration was for "rejoicing" after a good harvest, but not specifically for giving thanks. Note that the feast lasted three days. Note that Massasoit and ninety Wampanoags attended; there were at the time 50 colonists.

The colonists were outnumbered, and yet that is not mentioned as a factor to fear. So it is fair to assume that there was a certain amount of trust and goodwill. But the gauzy spin which white America has always put on this occasion looks very different from the Native American point of view.

I want to present to you that point of view from the pen of a man whom some of you may have known personally, because he lived here in Chatham. His name was Frank James, but he adopted the title Wamsutta to describe his role among the Wampanoags, using the name of Massasoit's son and successor. He was a town character, and many are the stories about his exploits. He was the first Native American to graduate from New England Conservatory, where my wife also attended many years later, and he was an excellent jazz trumpeter. He experienced much color discrimination in the 1940s and 50s, and could not get a job in symphonies. However, he built a wonderful music program at Nauset High School which continues to this day.

Wamsutta Frank James was one of the Indian activists who started the tradition of observing a National Day of Mourning on the day the rest of the country celebrates as Thanksgiving. In 1970, Mr. James was invited to speak at the ceremonies memorializing the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth. The committee organizing the memorial asked to see his text ahead of time, and when they saw what he had written, they would not let him go ahead and say what he had planned.

I'd like us to hear now part of what Wamsutta Frank James had prepared to say in 1970. I am not saying this is the last word from the Native American point of view, or that it represents all Native Americans. But it is a point of view we need to hear.

To read Frank James' words, I have asked Frank Toppa, who taught music under Mr. James at Nauset High School in the 1970s.

> I speak to you as a man -- a Wampanoags Man. I am a proud man, proud of my ancestry, my accomplishments won by a strict parental direction ("You must succeed - your face is a different color in this small Cape Cod community!"). I am a product of poverty and discrimination from these two social and economic diseases. I, and my brothers and sisters, have painfully overcome, and to some extent we have earned the respect of our community. We are Indians first - but we are termed "good citizens." Sometimes we are arrogant but only because society has pressured us to be so.
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> It is with mixed emotion that I stand here to share my thoughts. This is a time of celebration for you - celebrating an anniversary of a beginning for the white man in America. A time of looking back, of reflection. It is with a heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my People.
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> Even before the Pilgrims landed it was common practice for explorers to capture Indians, take them to Europe and sell them as slaves for 220 shillings apiece. The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod for four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors and stolen their corn and beans. Mount's

Relation describes a searching party of sixteen men. Mount goes on to say that this party took as much of the Indians' winter provisions as they were able to carry.

Massasoit, the great Sachem of the Wampanoags, knew these facts, yet he and his People welcomed and befriended the settlers of the Plymouth Plantation. Perhaps he did this because his Tribe had been depleted by an epidemic. Or his knowledge of the harsh oncoming winter was the reason for his peaceful acceptance of these acts. This action by Massasoit was perhaps our biggest mistake. We, the Wampanoags, welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end; that before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoags would no longer be a free people.

What happened in those short 50 years? What has happened in the last 300 years? History gives us facts and there were atrocities; there were broken promises - and most of these centered around land ownership. Among ourselves we understood that there were boundaries, but never before had we had to deal with fences and stone walls. But the white man had a need to prove his worth by the amount of land that he owned. Only ten years later, when the Puritans came, they treated the Wampanoags with even less kindness in converting the souls of the so-called "savages." Although the Puritans were harsh to members of their own society, the Indian was pressed between stone slabs and hanged as quickly as any other "witch."

And so down through the years there is record after record of Indian lands taken and, in token, reservations set up for him upon which to live. ...

Although time has drained our culture, and our language is almost extinct, we the Wampanoags still walk the lands of Massachusetts. We may be fragmented, we may be confused. Many years have passed since we have been a people together. Our lands were invaded. We fought as hard to keep our land as you the whites did to take our land away from us. We were conquered, we became the American prisoners of war in many cases, and wards of the United States Government, until only recently.

Our spirit refuses to die. Yesterday we walked the woodland paths and sandy trails. Today we must walk the macadam highways and roads. We are uniting We're standing not in our wigwams but in your concrete tent. We stand tall and proud, and before too many moons pass we'll right the wrongs we have allowed to happen to us.

We forfeited our country. Our lands have fallen into the hands of the aggressor. We have allowed the white man to keep us on our knees. What has happened cannot be changed, but today we must work towards a more humane America, a more Indian America, where men and nature once again are important; where the Indian values of honor, truth, and brotherhood prevail.

> You the white man are celebrating an anniversary. We the Wampanoags will help you celebrate in the concept of a beginning. It was the beginning of a new life for the Pilgrims. Now, 350 years later it is a beginning of a new determination for the original American: the American Indian.

What are we to make of this? I don't think Wamsutta is saying here that we can't celebrate Thanksgiving, and that we can't be grateful for the blessings of our lives. I think he is saying that gratitude for blessings must also encompass the cost of those blessings, the pain that has been inflicted on others. Our reading earlier reminded us to be grateful not just for the good things in life but also for the losses. Our gratitude for all we have been given in this life is large enough to encompass sorrow for those from whom much as been taken, and a resolve to see that ancient injustices are acknowledged, if not recompensed.

Rebecca Parker, the President of our Starr King seminary in Berkeley, CA, wrote a book called Blessing the World. I think that is what UUs are called to do at Thanksgiving. To bless the whole world, the good the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, the tragic, the unjust. We bless the world we are given, not some other world that we might imagine.

So let us now consider the elements that are before us[2]. This bread and cider represent the fruits of the earth. The ingredients of bread include wheat and corn and rye and barley– symbolizing the seeds planted and harvested, the staff of life, they include, water, representing freshness and purity, they include yeast, for raising the spirit, sugar for making th yeast work, salt, setting the limits of growth of the yeast, and eggs enriching and enlivening the texture of the

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[2]I have adapted elements of this communion from John Robinson at Eliot Chapel outside St. Louis. See *The Commmunion Book* by Carl Seaburg UU Ministers Assn, 1993.

bread. Except of course for this bread, which is gluten free.

All these ingredients are mixed, kneaded, raised, punched down for a finer quality, baked and cooled. Our common table is now laden with the bread of our many heritages, our many strains brought together.

Our bread, like life, must be broken to be whole, to fulfill a purpose, to embrace and nourish the bittersweet of life. Let us now break the bread.

[Bread is broken or cut into small bits and put into baskets while the choir sings Let Us Break Bread together on our Knees, 406; once the bread is in the baskets, the congregation says in unison]

We bless these loaves,

We bless his bread we have in common with one another and with people all over the earth.

We bless the events, people and places and the circumstances of our lives that feed us, sustain us, nourish us.

Invitation: From time immemorial, the sign of friendship and welcome reception of strangers has been the breaking of bread and the shared cup. We offer you bread and cider from our common table. Eat, drink, and enjoy our gathered company.

[The Bread and cider are distributed, eaten and drunk]

Closing Prayer Robert Louis Stevenson

Lord, behold our family here assembled. We thank Thee for this place in which we dwell; for the love that unites us; for the peace accorded us this day; for the hope with which we expect the morrow; for the health, the work, the food, and the bright skies, that make our lives delightful; for our friends in all parts of the earth, and our friendly helpers in this foreign isle. Let peace

abound in our small company. Purge out of every heart the lurking grudge. Give us grace and strength to forbear and to persevere. Offenders, give us the grace to accept and to forgive offenders. Forgetful ourselves, help us to bear cheerfully the forgetfulness of others. Give us courage and gaiety and the quiet mind. Spare to us our friends, soften to us our enemies. Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavours. If it may not, give us the strength to encounter that which is to come, that we be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath, and in all changes of fortune, and, down to the gates of death, loyal and loving one to another. As the clay to the potter, as the windmill to the wind, as children of their sire, we beseech of Thee this help and mercy.

Amen.