Stories of Thanksgiving

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
November 21, 2010

A few weeks ago, Mary Hannah Henderson and I preached a joint sermon on stories, and one of the things we said was that stories are one of the ways we order the world to give it meaning. When I was growing up, we told ourselves the story of the First Thanksgiving to explain why we have the custom we do of gathering with family and cooking a turkey and being grateful. When I was hearing that story in Columbia South Carolina, I would not have believed that I would come to live a few miles from where that all happened.

But that was then. This is now. Now we have a greater appreciation for how that event was seen from the Native American point of view. And from that point of view it is not pretty. At the time of the 350th anniversary of the landing at Plymouth Rock, in 1970, Native American activists suggested that what white America celebrates as a national day of Thanksgiving, Native America should observe as a national day of Mourning.

I start from the point that there is a lot of justification for this. There is a fight for the history, with revisionists and counter-revisionists offering competing versions[1], but even from the point of view most favorable to the settlers it appears that the history of the coming of Europeans to these shores from Columbus on has been a shocking one of slaughter, enslavement, theft, broken treaties and decimation by disease. I am not one to idealize pre-Columbian Indian life – it is not the Garden of Eden that some of us make it out to be – but the fact remains that the land we live on, the land this country occupies, was essentially stolen from an existing population by means none of us would approve today.

The Mayflower[2] left Plymouth, England in September 1620, intending to go to the mouth of the Hudson River, but the first land they saw was the hook of the Cape, what we now call Province town. They hunted for provisions down the inside of the Outer Cape, and at one point they took some corn which had been left at a burial site as food for the dead. A month later they crossed Cape Cod Bay and anchored off the coast of what is now Plymouth, Mass, but they didn't go ashore much that first winter. They suffered from exposure, scurvy and

---

[1]See http://www.angelfire.com/co/COMMONSENSE/lenape.html (Revisionist)

http://hnn.us/articles/15002.html (Counter revisionist)

[2]These facts are taken from the website of the History Channel

http://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving

contagious diseases, and only half of the original voyagers lived to see the spring. In March, the remaining settlers moved ashore, and one day they were astonished to find themselves greeted in English by an Abenaki Indian named was Samoset. He stayed with them for two days and then left, returning a few days later with Tisquantum, also known as Squanto, a member of the Pawtuxet tribe who was fluent in English. Squanto was fluent in English because he had been captured by an English sea captain several years before and sold into slavery in England, but had escaped and returned to Massachusetts on an exploratory expedition. When he finally returned to his native village near present day Plymouth, he found most of the population had died of diseases, probably as a result of European contact.

Squanto was a godsend for the settlers. He taught them how to grow corn, how to avoid poisonous plants, how to get maple sap from trees and how to fish in the rivers. The settlers were on the verge of starvation and they owed their survival to Squanto. He served as interpreter for the colonists for two years, and he ultimately died here in Chatham.

Squanto also negotiated a peace treaty between the English settlers and Massasoit, the sachem or chief of the Wampanoags. Massasoit was eager to make peace with the settlers for about 80% of the Wampanoags had died a few years earlier in an outbreak of smallpox, and Massasoit feared they could be taken over by the Naragansetts. A large statute of Massasoit stands near Plymouth Rock today.

After the first corn harvest proved successful in the fall of 1621, Governor William Bradford organized a feast at which the Wampanoags were present. The sole account of this event which survives is a few sentences in a letter from one of the settlers, Edward Winslow. He said

"Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men hunting wild fowl, so that we might have a special celebration together, after we had brought in our crops. Those four in one day killed as much wild fowl that it and some other food served the community almost a week. At that time, along with other recreations, we practiced shooting our muskets. Many of the Wampanoag came to the town including their leader Massasoit with about 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 presented to Governor Bradford and Captain Standish and others. Although food is not always so plentiful as it was at that time, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from starvation, that we often wish you could share our plenty.[3]"

Well, this account should puncture a few of our treasured myths. There is

---

[3] The Winslow letter, updated in spelling and grammar, is in the Teacher's

Resource at the Plimouth Plantations website,

http://www.plimoth.org/education/olc/hpteachg.html#primary

no evidence the feasters ate cranberry sauce, and the fowl mentioned may have been turkey, but maybe not. There were probably more Indians than settlers. And the feast lasted three days.

So there was some kind of meal, and the particular peace between the Plymouth settlers and the Wampanoags apparently lasted for fifty years, but it is one bright ray in a sorry mass of darkness. I want to add to this a short excerpt from a piece we read last year at Thanksgiving, which has a Chatham connection. Frank James was a talented Chatham musician and a Wampanoag who took on the title Wamsutta. Though James was the first Native American graduate of New England Conservatory, he could not get a job in an orchestra because of race prejudice, and spent a lot of his career as head of the music department at Nauset Regional High School, where our own Frank Toppa taught under him.

In 1970, the committee planning the 350th anniversary celebration of the landing at Plymouth Rock asked the Wampanoag to send a speaker to the ceremony, and they chose Frank James. But when the organizers saw what Frank was planning to say, they would not let him speak. Frank and his allies went on to designate this holiday as a National Day of Mourning and at one point they took some more direct action against Plymouth Rock itself.

Here is a little of what Frank James was going to say on that occasion forty years ago:

"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.

"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. Mourt's Relation describes a searching party of sixteen men. Mourt 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 Wampanoag, 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 Wampanoag, 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 Wampanoag

would no longer be a free people.[4]"

What are we to do with this? Most of us here probably identify by ancestry with the Europeans, but we empathize with the Naive Americans. We are thankful for this beautiful land we inhabit, but our gratitude must be mixed with compassion for the sufferings of the people from whom it was taken. The Europeans brought their guns, their germs, and their religion and while the Indians in many places fought back, they were no match.

How can we celebrate Thanksgiving with this in mind? I think a clue is offered by our reading this morning. Thanksgiving is "not about being glad for the good things that have happened to us — they are simply moments in the sun. Thanksgiving is standing still, with an injured and an open heart and letting the River run freely through us."

Human history is full of tragedy, of injustice, of domination of one people by another. As our individual histories are full of losses, divorces, estrangements, disappointments.

We look for a gratitude that is beyond the play of good and bad, that is deeper than gains and losses. The force to which we give thanks is the creator and the destroyer. Living in gratitude is not a matter of turkeys or cranberry sauce or justice or injustice. Living in gratitude is being open to all that is.

As one of our hymns (#128) says,
"For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise;
for all life is a gift which we are called to use
to build the common good and make our own days glad."

We cannot, we must not ignore the atrocities of the past; they are part of the tapestry of our history which make us who we are today. We give thanks for all of it, and we give thanks that we can come together in community to try to forge a more compassionate and just world for our children and grandchildren to live in. We are only a small number, but we are grateful for that number and we do what we can to build the Beloved Community where slavery and genocide and expropriation will not be practiced. With grateful hearts for all that is our life, let us now turn to the communion.
Amen.

"Run River Run" by Susan Hull *Skirt* magazine, Charleston SC 1996
We are what we are given/and what is taken away..." — Wendell Berry

Norman Maclean wades into the swift silver of Big Blackfoot River, casting for memories with the same reverence that he reserves for trout. Planting his feet in the slowly deepening riverbed, Norman begins to hear the long story of his life

[4]The speech in its entirety is on the website of United American Indians of New England (UAINE) http://www.uaine.org/

cascading by — from his birth in Missoula, Montana, where the river banks were the breasts on which he fed as a child, through a restive adolescent initiation in the roaring rapids, the still reflections of his first love, to the dark eddies of gambling and debt that pulled his brother under. Now all are gone home before him in that great race to the sea. "Eventually," Norman concludes from the timeless sibilant prayer of water on rock, "eventually all things merge into One, and a River runs through it."

There is a river that runs through us. It is Mystery, it is Life, some say God. It descends through my granite soul with the force of gravity and love, plunges through empty canyons, chisels out corridors with its wet hands and slowly, ever so, widens the cracks and crevices of my failures into pools where grace collects. The injury of the river is also its gift. Where I have been cut deeply, so there Life most deeply, most surely, flows.

I don't believe that the gifts of God come in the form of goodness, but in the face of Life itself. In danger's shadow as well as dazzling light, in a disquieted heart as often as a still mind, in labor as in love. If we would receive the sacred, we must receive the river's flow, even as it injures, even as it takes away.

I thank God for my handicaps said Helen Keller, unable to hear a bubbling stream or see its glistening green or put it into praise. Yet she praises: I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work, my God.

That, to me, is thanksgiving. It's not about being glad for the good things that have happened to us — they are simply moments in the sun. Thanksgiving is standing still, with an injured and an open heart and letting the River run freely through us. Each year at this time, I stop and cast into the water. I recount the story of the year past, of life given and taken away: our planet's staggering losses, our moments of forgiveness, our fulgent gains. I think of a friend's child who came swimming into this world on amniotic rivers, and I remember my grandmother's final crossing over t the other shore. I remember the intense hope of eyes brimming with the vows of marriage, and the loosening tears of those whose hope was broken. I think of my own love found, or friends lost.

We are what we are given and what is taken away, blessed by the name of the giver and taker... The confluence of all things returns to the Sea, the Source. The Gift unites with the Giver. Let the river run. The banks of my heart are wide with thanks