

Fourth Thursday in November

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BY MARK H. ALCOTT

Thanksgiving is America's most unifying holiday. It is secular; it is national; it is largely free of commercialization and kitsch. No gifts, no cards, no costumes, no fireworks. All Americans, whether their state is red or blue, whatever their faith, celebrate Thanksgiving at the same time, in the same simple way—on the fourth Thursday in November, with a feast, at home, in the company of loved ones.

What is it that we are celebrating? Not a great battle or victory; not the life of a heroic figure; not a divine intervention in human affairs. We are celebrating another simple feast, 400 years ago, at the dawn of our modern history, shared by newcomers to these shores and long-time residents.

Who were these newcomers, and what brought them here?



They were migrants, aliens, intruders. They arrived uninvited, unannounced, without passports or visas. They did not speak the inhabitants' language and, for the most part, never learned to do so. They did not share the inhabitants' race, religion or culture. No homes, relatives or jobs awaited them. And yet they came, fleeing persecution and seeking a better life for themselves and their children.

These were America's first undocumented immigrants. Very few of us are their true descendants, but, on this day, we all identify with them and celebrate their arrival.

And what did they encounter when they got here? Not a wall, armed guards, or forced separation from their children. Not hostility, derision or name-calling. On the contrary, they found inhabitants who greeted

them with words of welcome and shared a feast with them.

That is our national narrative. That is the event and the idea we all embrace every year on the fourth Thursday in November.

Yes, some of it is myth, but most is historically accurate, as documented in such authentic accounts as “Mayflower”, by Nathaniel Philbrick, and in the work of other scholars. In any event, Thanksgiving is more important for what we celebrate today than for what actually happened in 1621. The distinction between fact and myth doesn’t really matter when commemorating a 400 year old event. A nation is defined by the history it embraces and the mythology it creates.

From Plymouth Rock to the Statue of Liberty, from *e pluribus unum* to “the melting pot” to “the American dream”, our country has always seen itself and, until recently, has been seen by others, as a land that welcomes the tired, the poor, the persecuted, the refugee. That is why the rejection of those fleeing the Holocaust still haunts us 80 years later. That is why the xenophobia that greets immigrants today is so shameful.

Thanksgiving Day is our annual revalidation of this self-image. It is the day we reclaim America’s soul.

Now, of course, years later, there was a tragic sequel to the relationship created on the first Thanksgiving. There were mass atrocities. There was mayhem and annihilation. There was war and injustice. We cannot absolve our forbearers from that dark chapter of our early history, or deny that, to a significant extent, we have reaped what they sowed.

But focusing on that somber aftermath completely misses the point of Thanksgiving and ignores its meaning, because that is not what we celebrate on this holiday. We do not celebrate vanquishing a foe or conquering territory. What we celebrate on Thanksgiving is the story recited above and the idea that it represents: Residents welcoming immigrants, breaking bread with them, offering them hospitality, generosity and opportunity.

That is America’s self-proclaimed *raison d’être*, embodied in such icons as Emma Lazarus, Ellis Island, and courthouse naturalization ceremonies; and embraced by all of us. We have often struggled to live up to that

standard, but it remains the ideal to which we aspire, which we hope the world will continue to admire, and for which we must still be thankful on the fourth Thursday in November.

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