

*"The Grateful Heart:
A Thanksgiving Sermon"*

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If you ever wonder how legends begin, how mythic stories originate and grow to have a life and power of their own, all you have to do is spend some time with young children, and they will give you an education. If you spend any time with kids, you know that one of the most favorite activities of children between the ages of four and ten is telling and retelling family stories.

"Tell me about the day I was born..... or tell me about the big snow storm when we all had to sleep at the airport..... or tell me again about the day I fell and broke my arm and how you brought me to the hospital....."

Children love these stories in which their place in the family line and in the family lore is acknowledged and remembered and cemented. They never seem to tire of hearing them told again and again. And if the stories grow just a bit in detail and imagination over the years, so much the better. **"Tell me again.... start at the beginning.....and then what happened?"**

Our stories are important, the tragedies and the comedies, the adventures and the trials, the near-catastrophes and the good fortunes of survival and healing and escape from calamity. For it is in the stories that we come to see, at an early age, who we are and where we come from, who relates to us, and what our family is like, and what are the chords of memory that bind us together or make our group special.

Stories illustrate all the strengths and weaknesses, the ideals and values, the successes and the misfortunes of the family systems into which we were born. And moreover, stories take all these important bits of information - these pieces of our identity - and allow us to absorb them in ways that are accessible and recallable and re-tellable whenever we need them. They are filed away in our hearts, these stories; tucked away inside us as children. And with remarkable and reliable consistency they continue to be part of us our whole life long.

Stories are powerful, even for adults. That's why we never outgrow our attraction to that magical phrase, **"once upon a time...."**

"Tell me again..... start at the beginning.... what happened next?"

We come again this week into that time of year that has tremendous mythic pull for many Americans, even for those of us who now live as ex-pats in a foreign land. Just as the Northern hemisphere enters the time of diminishing

daylight and increasing cold, the time of cultural stories and legends, of holidays and holy days commences. It is as if, to see us through the onset of a new winter's chill, we call up the mythic memories, the old stories and legends of familiarity.

Thanksgiving is one of those mythic stories for us in America. My goodness, what we have done to mythologize the story of the Pilgrims and their Thanksgiving feast. And consequently, how gleefully we love to debunk that story and expose those poor Pilgrim forbears for the hopelessly human and flawed characters they really were.

In William Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation we read details of that first winter in Plymouth which Bradford called "sadd & lamentable." Only 55 of the 102 Pilgrims lived through that winter of 1620-21. In that first terrible season, shivering in their makeshift cabins, sometimes two or three of them died in a day.

After the fortunate harvest of 1621, the 55 who still survived gave themselves a three-day feast of thanksgiving. (It was not until President Lincoln issued the first Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863 that the day became an official American holiday.)

I love what the late Peter Fleck once wrote in a Thanksgiving sermon. **"We assume," he says, "that the Pilgrims, following their first tragic winter in their new home, were thankful for having survived. *But it seems to me that they were able to survive because first they were thankful.*"**

I think we moderns have a difficult translation to make here if we are to understand the Pilgrim notion of Thanksgiving, their notion of a thankful spirit, because we trip over the double trap of our own modern cynicism and our own relative view of appropriate thankfulness.

The cynic in us is forever weighing and balancing our blessings and our banes, bemoaning our sorrows as undeserved, distrusting our benefactions as accidental and impermanent. We know that we are singularly blessed among peoples of the earth, blessed with good fortune and prosperity, blessed with abundance of resources and of riches. And we know how fortunate we are. We compare our privileged place on the earth with the less fortunate, and it is hard to offer a modest thanks in a world where so much misery abides, where the divide between the haves and the have-nots is so vast.

As Peter Fleck puts it, in years of plenty we are thankful for our bounty. And in years of merely modest blessings, we're thankful that life wasn't worse. But what of those other years, should we have equally thankful spirits in those years when we go through life "with our wants unsupplied, when we carry with us unfulfilled wishes, unsatisfied desires?" (see sermon, "On Giving Thanks" in G. Peter Fleck's The Mask of Religion, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, 1980).

Some years ago, when I was studying the history of the first Puritan churches in New England founded in the 1600's, many of which eventually evolved into Unitarian and Universalist parishes in the 1800's, I came across a curious phrase which actually appeared quite often in old Puritan prayers. The phrase is, "***Spare us, O God, from a dead heart while yet we live.***"

A strange prayer, isn't it? Yet it was one that 17th century New Englanders found somehow consoling. A dead heart, to these passionate New World pioneers, meant a heart devoid of feeling, lacking zest for life. The indifference of a dead heart, historian Perry Miller tells us, was a not uncommon theme in early Puritan preaching.

In prayer after lengthy Puritan prayer, these old Calvinists sought deliverance not only from temptation, but from the scourge of what they called a "dead heart" - from numbness of the spirit, from the death of mutual caring for one another and for their God.

Their fervent prayerful request strikes us, at first, as stark and disconsolate and joyless. But listen closely to this prayer and go beneath the words if you can.

"Spare us, O God, from a dead heart while yet we live. Spare us from the failure to love each other fiercely enough. Spare us from the deadening effects of cynicism and despair. Spare us from an unfeeling spirit while yet so much remains to be done in our lives. Hold us fast, God, keep the passion for beauty, joy, and peace alive in our souls. Spare us from a dead heart while yet we live!"

So far removed are we from the Pilgrim's *habit* of a thankful spirit, from the religious *habit* of gratitude, from the daily acknowledgment of the gift of life itself, that we make thankfulness a relative term rather than the religious *absolute* that it ought to be.

A thankful attitude, that is, *thankfulness for life itself* - not *after* the fact, but *during* the fact, in the *midst* of life, thankfulness in the *midst* of the struggles, trials, tribulations, and disappointments that are part of every life. That's what the myth of Thanksgiving is really about, don't you think?

That's what the lesson of Thanksgiving is: that we are all of us very human, very flawed Pilgrims. We have good years and we have bad years, and we have all kinds of years in between. But gifted as we are with the privilege of life for yet one more year, participating as we do in this fragile, fleeting, precious and precarious process of life, we have reason to be thankful every day. Every day!

We are the children of life, the product of the most mysterious and complex processes of the universe. Reason to be thankful? Oh yes! We are blessed with the ability to love others; to be bringers of joy and justice; to be

bearers of hope and peace in the world. But we must learn anew each year to speak out the love and the gratitude we feel for our lives, we must take courage to voice what hides in our hearts and what withers unless we breathe it forth.

Peter LaForge's poem always comes to my mind this time of year:

***Perhaps I should have said it just between
The wine and grace, the wishing and the blessing.
That was a time for words, when the scene
Had just begun, before we passed the dressing.
Before the knife cut deep into the breast,
I might have paused, looked up and all around
Into the eyes of each of them.
A jest came easier, wit tossed into the sound
And lost. Between the stuffing and the pie,
Was yet another quiet moment when
I could have told them all. Instead, I sighed
and let it pass. Just once before the end
I should have cried, "listen, before you go.
I love you. I just wanted you to know."
- Peter Laforge***

Reason to be thankful? Most certainly, yes! Within us, within our hearts there are many places wherein we carry the stories of all the pilgrims who ever lived through all the harsh winters and bright springtimes that ever were. Have we reason to be thankful? Have we reason to sing in gladness for the life within us? Have we cause to dance in the face of our mortality? Oh yes! Yes, indeed we have.

In a passage that I love from Barbara Kingsolver's novel [Animal Dreams](#), the young woman Codi is talking with her friend Lloyd about the meaning of the Indians' corn dance. He is trying to get across to her the attitude inherent in Native American spirituality.

"So you make this deal with the gods," she says. "You do these dances and they'll send rain and good crops and the whole works? And nothing bad will ever happen, right...."

....After a minute he said, "No, it's not like that. It's not making a deal, bad things can still happen, but you want to try not to cause them to happen. It has to do with keeping things in balance. It has to do with your attitude."

"In balance," she said. "Attitude."

He said, "Really, it's like the spirits have made a deal with us. "

"And what's the deal?" she asked.

"We're on our own. The spirits have been good enough to let us live here and use the utilities, and we're saying : We know how nice you're being. We appreciate the rain, we appreciate the sun, we appreciate the deer we took. Sorry if we messed up anything. You've gone to a lot of trouble and we'll try to be good guests."

She says, "It's like a note you'd send to somebody after you stayed in their house?"

"Exactly like that," says Lloyd. *"Thanks for letting me sleep on your couch. I took some beer out of the refrigerator, and I broke a coffee cup. Sorry. I hope it wasn't your favorite one."*

And Codi laughed because she understood. "It's a good idea," she said. "Especially since we're still here sleeping on God's couch. We're permanent houseguests."

"Yep, we are," said Lloyd. "Better remember to put everything back how we found it."

(Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*. HarperCollins, Publishers. 1990. pp. 239-40.)

Attitude. The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart suggests that if the only prayer we ever say in our lifetime is "thank you," that would suffice.

Tucked away in a sermon notebook, I found this little prayer by Maya Angelou that fell out onto my lap last week. I took it as a sign that I should share it with you today. It reads: *"I thank you, God, for my life and everything that's in it. I thank you for this day, for this hour, for every minute. Many old friends are gone. But I'm still holding on. I thank you."*

I'm suggesting this morning that gratitude for life, a thankful spirit, is something more than just a possible *response* to life when it is going well, when fortune is smiling upon us. A thankful spirit is rather the continuing invitation that we extend to life itself to inhabit our hearts and thus keep possibility alive within us and about us.

The words of the hymn have it correct: *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.* Amen.

-- Patrick T. O'Neill