



Homegrown Thoughts on Thanksgiving

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Last year a friend declined a Thanksgiving invitation because of the "fixation on the turkey" that the holiday entails. Because she is a vegetarian, I understood and respected her wish. But it got me pondering about Thanksgiving, a holiday I love but one whose meaning has often shifted over time.

Thanksgiving's connection with the multicultural event that purportedly inspired it has waned. Less is known of that Pilgrim feast than is known about the way we later treated those native tribes. The more ancient idea of the harvest festival doesn't resonate much either.

Few Americans gather together on the fourth Thursday in November to celebrate the bringing in of sheaves, though millions of them jam the stores the next day to celebrate the Biggest Christmas Shopping Day of the Year, weirdly called "Black Friday." Religious observance of Thanksgiving is also slight, though there is still an ethical tug. People do stop and think a bit about their good fortune and how it should not be taken for granted. Thus hordes of volunteers show up at soup kitchens, which could better use their efforts the other 364 days of the year.

Perhaps it really does come down to getting together and eating a turkey, or a tofurkey, or four kinds of pie, or whatever particular fixation of yours comes into play. Families go to enormous lengths to convene, overwhelming the airline industry, which would prefer a less frenetic stimulus package. For many weeks preceding, food editors brush all other subjects off their desks.

But look at it this way: A historical reenactment is, in fact, taking place in homes all over America, not one that depicts life in 1621 but, let's say, 1921. In this period drama, the extended family is not scattered across the country. Three or even four generations assemble around the table eating home-cooked, if not homegrown, food. The hand labor and group effort required promotes camaraderie in the kitchen. Favorite recipes reappear, faithfully, from one year to the next. In some homes, fall crops from the garden even come into play - happily, a growing trend.

In 2010, even if only one generation assembles each night at your dinner table, with the TV off, you're doing better than many. Families that eat together are much studied by sociologists, epidemiologists, nutritionists and other researchers, who seem to agree that these meals help foster better communication and better health.

But I think we all know, without being told, that the table is enormously important as a bond among family and friends. And the more we abandon it, the more important Thanksgiving becomes as a modern ritual, a reminder of the way life could be all the time. We have gathered. The TV is off. The mashed potatoes are made from scratch. Amen.

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