

“Thanksgiving Blessings with Relatives of Different Religious Beliefs”

Rev. Roger Fritts

In my lifetime, the movie industry has produced several images of Thanksgiving. One example is the 1969 movie “Alice’s Restaurant,” a true story about how folk singer Arlo Guthrie avoided being drafted into the military because he had been arrested for dumping trash illegally. The trash was the result of a Thanksgiving meal held in a former church in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1965. The church, originally built in 1829, was purchased by Ray and Alice in 1964 and they made it their home. In 1991, Arlo Guthrie bought the church and converted it to the Guthrie Center, a nondenominational, interfaith meeting place. Now each year on thanksgiving a “Garbage Trail Walk,” retraces the route that Arlo took to dump the trash. The walk raises money for research into Huntington's disease. After the walk the Guthrie Center hosts a “Thanksgiving dinner that can't be beat” for people in the local community. The real Alice today lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she owns an art studio and gallery. Let us watch the prayer before the meal in the 1969 movie.

Selection from Alice’s Restaurant

Nearly thirty years later the 1995 movie “Home for the Holidays” presents a different sort of grace, where instead of being polite, everyone impulsively says what he or she are thinking. An unmarried aunt sings. The mother of the house says a few words. While she is speaking, one daughter asks her sister if she is on a diet. The father gives a rambling prayer, free-associating. In response to “amen,” the granddaughter says “a-women.” The gay son says, “That was absurd. Let’s eat dead bird.”

Selection from Home for the Holidays

These are images of American thanksgivings created by the writers, photographers, editors, and musicians in our movie industry. Of course, none of them is exactly like any Thanksgiving meal in which I have participated.

Over the years, I have spent thanksgivings alone, with 1 other person, and with groups of 5, 10, 20, or 30 people. While many of these thanksgivings I have attended have been peaceful, on a few occasions I have seen relatives and friends get really annoyed with each other. I remember a shouting match over how to cook rice. I was in school in Berkeley. It was too far and too expensive to go back home for Thanksgiving, so some friends kindly invited me to join them. One man, who was getting his doctorate in economics, put water in a pot, dumped the rice in, put the pot on the stove, and turned on the flame. This man's brother, who was a medical student, said, “That's no way to cook rice. First, you bring the water to a boil. Then you put the rice in.” The brothers stood in the kitchen shouting at each other over what was the best way to cook rice. The rest of us wondered how we might intervene to calm things down.

Of course, the argument was not really about rice. I did not know the details, but I assume that the rice was symbolic of a need to determine who was in charge. I suspect that it was a continuation of a childhood struggle. I thought of the story in Genesis of Joseph and his brothers. The father loved Joseph

more than he loved the other sons. As it says in Genesis “when his brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than all his sons, they hated him and they could not speak peaceably to him.”

A solution to the conflict over the rice is the common law rule of hospitality. Most of us would agree that the adults who are hosting the meal, the adults who live in the home where the meal is being served, are in charge. In the example of the rice, the medical student was renting the apartment. Therefore, he gets to be in charge of what food is prepared, how the food is prepared, and how it is served. The Stanford student, although he was the older brother, needed to defer to the younger brother because he was in his younger brother's home. Of course, younger brother could ask for advice from older brother, but in his apartment, the younger brother was ultimately in charge. A Thanksgiving meal in a home is not a pure democracy. There is a hierarchy.

Such commonly accepted rules of civility make family life and Thanksgiving dinners possible, and they play an important role in creating healthy families. The hosting of the symbolic dinner, like a Thanksgiving meal, is an opportunity for the hosts to establish their identity as competent leaders in a family system. When a son or a daughter offers to host a Thanksgiving meal in their apartment, the parents can give their child a gift by allowing them to take charge of the meal. A brother or a sister can give the gift of respect to their sibling by allowing that sibling to be the leader of the meal.

Of course, the question of who is in charge is not the only source of tension. When we sit down to eat at thanksgiving, the conversation at the meal offers opportunities for people to become upset and want to run from the room. This year the conversation may turn to next year's presidential election. You may have at your Thanksgiving table family members or friends who support Barack Obama's re-election and others who are passionately convinced that his presidency is a disaster for the nation. There are strong feelings in our nation about politics. The strong political feelings can mix with family turf wars. They can mix with feelings of competition between family members. Feelings about politics can mix with the desire of each person in the family to establish their separate identity. This can lead to a stressful Thanksgiving.

In my experience, these arguments over the Thanksgiving table cannot be resolved. You will not be successful in convincing relatives that Barack Obama was the right choice for president. You will not be successful at Thanksgiving in convincing your relatives that the legislators should make gay marriage legal. You will not be successful a convincing them that they should become vegetarians. You will not be successful at Thanksgiving and convincing your relatives that just because you are a Unitarian Universalist, you are not condemned to eternal damnation in hell.

Say what you think and then let it go. Do not get hooked into an argument. Perhaps over time they might come to see the wisdom of your perspective.

How do I love my annoying relatives who refuse to see the world the way I see the world? I remind myself of my belief that inside every human being is a spark of divinity. My friends, with their stupid argument over how to cook the rice, each has a spark of divinity in them. My politically conservative brother-in-law and his fundamentalist Christian wife both have within them a spark of divinity. There is a

bit of God in everyone. Each person has this potential goodness in their soul, which if properly nurtured, can help them develop into sensitive compassionate persons.

When it comes to thanksgiving, no one wants to have a disastrous gathering. Everyone at the table is ultimately there because they want to love and be loved. We differ only in how we think we can achieve this togetherness. If we speak words of criticism, or contempt or sarcasm, when talking about politics, religion, or some other subject, we do so because we have not learned, or have forgotten how to speak words of appreciation and respect. Rather than becoming reactive, I try to remember that every human being has within a spark of divinity, that we all have within our souls a little bit of God and that therefore we all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

All of us have our hot buttons issues about which we are not very rational. Conversations at Thanksgiving can push these buttons and stir us up. We forget about the spark of divinity. We launch into criticism, contempt, and sarcasm conveying our strong feelings. When this happens, it is time to take a walk. When our annoying relatives really upset us, the chemicals in our body, our adrenaline gets going and we lose the ability to love. Evolution has given us bodies that flood us with adrenaline to help us defend ourselves when we feel threatened, even when we feel threatened at a family gathering. Once this adrenaline gets going it takes about 20 minutes for it to disperse and until it does, we do not feel very loving. If this happens, it is time to take a walk to calm down. The breathing exercises that mediators teach can help in calming down. And prayer, prayer can help us move from feeling threatened to feeling loving.

These are my guides for loving my annoying relatives at Thanksgiving.

First, I remind myself that the hosts are in charge, and the guests need to defer to the hosts.

Second, I remind myself that arguments over the Thanksgiving table cannot be won. So I say briefly what I think, but do not expect others to change their mind and agree with me.

Third, I believe that inside each of my friends and relatives is a spark of divinity. A tiny part of God is in their soul. However annoying they are, they are doing their best.

Fourth, if one of my annoying friends or relatives really gets to me, instead of fighting back, I take a walk. I breathe deeply. I say a prayer.

The thanksgiving movie I like the best is called "What's Cooking?" made in 2000. The scenes we are about to see are a collage of family life, showing the different foods that are served for Thanksgiving in four different ethnic traditions.

Four families live on the four corners of the same residential intersection in Los Angeles. We will first see a Jewish family with a lesbian daughter and her partner. Next, we see a Hispanic family eating their Thanksgiving meal outside in their backyard. The movie fades from the Hispanic family to an African-American family. Then movie fades from the African-American family to the Vietnamese family. In a previous scene, the Vietnamese have burned their turkey. It is uneatable. They have a lot of wonderful

Vietnamese food prepared, but for the main dish, you will see that they have improvised at the last minute.

The movie fades back to the Jewish family saying grace. Then it fades to the prayers of the Hispanic family and then to the African-American family. The last scene we will see is the Vietnamese family where the youngest child prays for his brother Jimmy who he thinks is up in Berkeley in college. Jimmy is actually across the street with his girlfriend in the Hispanic family.

Let us watch this Thanksgiving collage.

Selection from What's Cooking?