

ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO OBSERVE THANKSGIVING
Portland Friends (Quaker) Meeting
November 2021

Dear Friends ~

In October, members of Wabanaki Reach offered a rich four-session workshop on “Decolonizing Faith.” Attendees from Portland Friends subsequently formed groups to pursue different forms of faithful action as allies to Indigenous People. One group set out to look at the distorted myths surrounding the holiday of Thanksgiving, and to propose possible mitigations in the way that we as individuals and families observe the holiday. The thoughts below are a work-in-progress toward imagining and enacting a more just form of Thanksgiving, one that acknowledges dark historical truths and attempts to honor the spirit of gratefulness embedded in daily Indigenous practices. *We try to follow a path of the appropriate over appropriation* yet coming from people of European heritage we surely will get some things wrong. If you identify such a moment, please let us know so that this document can live and breathe into the future.

Some will call for non-observation of a holiday wrought by White domination. Others may wish to modify their observation in minor or major ways. We hope that some of the information and suggestions below will guide you toward an observation that puts you in “righter” (if not “right”) relationship to Indigenous people and an American national tradition that is deeply flawed, yet also offers a pause to focus on thankfulness that many people value.

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Practice #1: Support the NATIONAL DAY OF MOURNING

(Kathy Beach)

The National Day of Mourning, the fourth Thursday in November, is observed by the Wampanoag people (pronounced either Wam-pan-OH-ag or WAM-pan-og), the original inhabitants of what is now called New England. Other Americans who support the Wampanoag and recognize Native American perspectives also observe this day.

The National Day of Mourning reminds all of us that Thanksgiving is only part of the story. Native Americans, since 1970, have gathered at noon on Cole's Hill in Plymouth, Massachusetts, to commemorate this National Day of Mourning. Pilgrims landed in Plymouth and established the first English colony in 1620. As such, it's the oldest municipality in New England. Many Native Americans, however, do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims and other European settlers. Thanksgiving, to them, is a brutal reminder of the genocide of millions of Native people, the theft of Native lands, and the relentless assault on Native culture.

The Wampanoag participate in order to honor Native ancestors and to support Native peoples' struggle to survive and thrive today. It is a day of remembrance and spiritual connection as well as a protest against the racism and oppression which Native Americans continue to experience. The United American Indians of New England (UAINE) sponsors this event. They maintain that the Pilgrims arrived in North America and claimed tribal land for their own, instead of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with the local inhabitants.

The National Day of Mourning generally begins at noon and includes a march through the historic district of Plymouth. While the UAINE encourages people of all backgrounds to attend the protests, only Native speakers are invited to give speeches about the past, as well as about current obstacles. Guests are asked to bring non-alcoholic beverages, desserts, fresh fruits and vegetables, or pre-cooked items. The protest is open to the public.

Actions Friends might want to take:

- Donate what you can to [The United American Indians of New England \(UAINE\)](#).
- At noon on November 25th this year, remember Native Americans in your area who are still struggling due to the actions of European settlers, beginning in 1620.
- The [National Day of Mourning](#) can be live-streamed at 12 noon EST via www.uaine.org or at the [UAINE Facebook Group](#). Take a break from cooking and view it together!

Practice #2: Consider a LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

(Group)

You may be moved to include a Land Acknowledgement at the Thanksgiving table.

- Land acknowledgements--expressions of awareness that the land we are on was occupied for thousands of years by Indigenous people--do not always honor Indigenous peoples.
- Acknowledgements are apt to be a meaningless rote performance without commitment to action.
- There are ways to signal a genuine, heart-felt allyship in a land acknowledgement.

PFM's Diana White supplied us with this article. Read it if you have the time!

<https://theconversation.com/land-acknowledgments-meant-to-honor-indigenous-people-too-often-do-the-opposite-erasing-american-indians-and-sanitizing-history-instead-163787>

KEY POINTS:

- Land acknowledgements are just “feel-good” gestures if there’s no measurable, concrete change.
- They risk relegating Indigenous folk to a mythic prehistory with no mention of today’s peoples.
- They often fail to acknowledge the “violent trauma of land being stolen from Indigenous people – the death, dispossession and displacement of countless individuals and collective suffering.”
- They can, however, “chart a path forward for redressing the harm inflicted through the process of land dispossession.” ... “If an acknowledgment is discomfiting and triggers uncomfortable conversations versus self-congratulation, it is likely on the right track.”

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#### Consider including this (Maine-specific) Land Acknowledgment from PFM's Emily Troll.

Reviewed by Mihku Paul, Wayne Cobb, Jessica Eller, and Ann Dodd-Collins

[Draft]

*Today, and every day, we walk on stolen land. We pray on stolen land. The forests, the rivers, the mountains, the meadows. Also, the highways, and city buildings, houses, and corner stores. This is what occupation looks like.*

*We are meeting here in the Dawnland, where the sovereign people of the Wabanaki Confederacy, including the Maliseet, Micmac, Penobscot, and Passamaquoddy, have lived for thousands of years. And the many Abenaki tribes, some destroyed, some scattered. As Quakers, many of our ancestors, both by blood and by spirit, participated in the theft of this land, the separation of children from their families, and the attempt to end indigenous culture.*

*Today, we mourn the lives and ways of living that were taken. We honor the resilience and power of our Wabanaki neighbors.*

*As we continue to live and govern in ways that harm this land and its people, it is past time for reparations. For learning the truth. For listening. For taking action. And there is still time. This is our work to do.*

### **Practice #3: Share the HAUDENOSAUNEE THANKSGIVING ADDRESS**

(Jennifer Frick)

I have reread the chapter from Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* on the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address. She states that the Haudenosaunee have had a desire to get this out to the world even in differing forms and lengths (apparently, it's now in forty languages.) My trepidation about misappropriating was somewhat eased, but I have since had to feel out where our gathered reading of the Address at Meeting for Worship falls. I've concluded that we can look at it as a collective reading (as opposed to a private reading) for educational and action-taking purposes.

As we engage in efforts toward Right Relations with Indigenous people, we know that re-education on our part is a major, needed undertaking. My understanding is that Native folks want us not only to learn about their practice but to deepen our understanding of our vital connection to Nature, so that we can drastically change our approach and, hopefully, turn away the tide of destruction now in progress.

I'm also intending to look on the internet for other approaches. To me, the text, context, and power of this address to connect us to each other and all of life is an essential part of our education into Indigenous culture.

The term "Thanksgiving" in this context refers not to the settler holiday on the 25th, but to the Native practice of showing appreciation for Mother Earth and all her inhabitants. It is used at the opening and closing of ceremonies and celebrations, as well as other gatherings. Its Native title, (the Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen) translates as "the words that come before all else" or "that which we do before all things." The Maine Wabanaki REACH version of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address is here:

[https://www.mainewabanakireach.org/haudenosaunee\\_thanksgiving\\_address](https://www.mainewabanakireach.org/haudenosaunee_thanksgiving_address)

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## **Practice #4: LOCAL FOODS & "THREE SISTERS" NOURISHMENT**

(Jessica Eller)

FOOD!

As we consider what we shall prepare for harvest feasts and celebrations at this time, I encourage everyone to use local foods whenever possible. The Portland Farmers Market continues in Deering Oaks throughout November, and the Portland Food Coop carries many local items. It is a joyful experience to look at my plate and be able to identify where everything on it came from as I give thanks. It is something I continually aspire to!

In addition, I was interested in finding some recipes to share that use as their primary ingredients the Three Sisters (corn, beans, squash) -- a staple combination in many Indigenous diets. Healthy, delicious real food! Here are a few worth sharing:

<https://www.suwanneerose.com/2019/11/3-sisters-harvest-bowls/>

<https://shelburnefarms.org/blog/three-sisters-soup>

<https://indigenousoh.com/2018/03/02/indigenous-foods-and-recipes/>

A sample set of ingredients (for “Three Sisters Harvest Bowls”)

For the squash:

2 cups Seminole pumpkin or kabocha squash, peeled and cubed

pinch of salt

1 T balsamic vinegar

1 T olive oil

For the beans and corn

1 T olive oil

1 Vidalia onion, diced

1-2 stalks celery, diced

1 red pepper, dice

2 T chopped parsley

1 T chopped sage

1 t. minced rosemary

1 t. thyme leaves

2 ears corn

1 ½ c precooked or canned beans

salt & pepper to taste

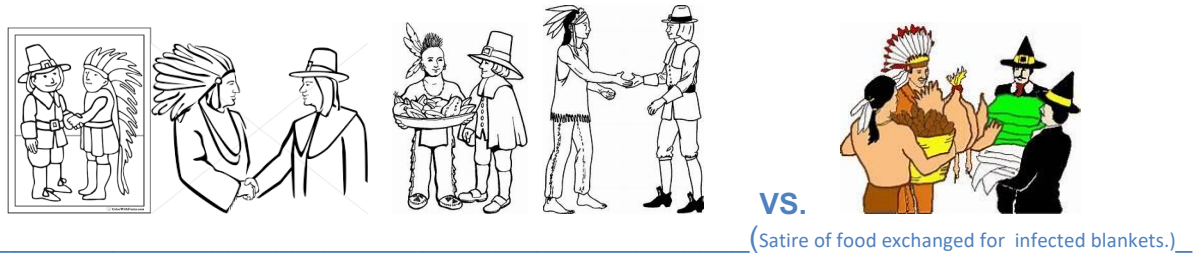
Serve with wild rice, quinoa, arugula, or kale.

## **Practice #5: Learn CORRECTIVES to THANKSGIVING MYTHS**

(Julie de Sherbinin)

**First Corrective: The Wampanoag Welcomed the Pilgrims in 1620/21**

“The myth is that friendly Indians, unidentified by tribe, welcome the Pilgrims to America, teach them how to live in this new place, sit down to dinner with them and then disappear. They hand off America to white people so they can create a great nation dedicated to liberty, opportunity, and Christianity for the rest of the world to profit. That’s the story—it’s about Native people conceding to colonialism. It’s bloodless and in many ways an extension of the ideology of Manifest Destiny.” (Interview with David Silverman, The Smithsonian, 11/26/2019)



Matika Wilbur (Swinomish & Tulalip heritage)

“When I had the privilege of visiting my Wampanoag relatives, they shared the real story of Thanksgiving with me. Paula Peters explained, *“The story of grateful Pilgrims and happy Indians breaking bread and celebrating the first successful colonial harvest has been the fairy tale Americans have long preferred over the truth. The original harvest feast that inspired the Thanksgiving holiday was in fact an impromptu gathering that one might say was more an act of diplomacy and show of force by Wampanoag Massasoit, Oosameequan (that was his name meaning yellow feather). The single paragraph and only primary source reference to the event penned by Edward Winslow remarks that, “Oosameequan arrived uninvited with 90 men, who remained for three days and contributed deer and fowl”- which may or may not have included a turkey. [This was] evidence of an early tenuous alliance still being tested.”* (<http://www.project562.com/blog/a-thanksgiving-message-from-seven-amazing-native-americans/>)

**FACT:** By 1621 the Wampanoag had been in contact with Europeans for over a century.

**FACT:** Europeans had brought and spread disease and engaged in slave raiding.

**FACT:** Some Wampanoag had traveled to Europe and spoke English.

**THEORY:** Ousamequin sought an alliance with the English against Narragansett rivals and, perhaps, against factions in his own tribe.

**THEORY:** Evidence suggests discord among the Wampanoag, some of whom wanted to join forces with their foes, the Narragansett, to rid New England of colonists by destroying their settlements.

In short, Indigenous People were looking out for their own political interests, not welcoming colonists.

David Silverman. *This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving*, NY: Bloomsbury Pub., 2019. ([Purchase locally here](#) or [nationally here.](#))

### **Second Corrective: Popular Images**

Popular Thanksgiving iconography depicts “Indians” in war bonnets of the Plains tribes never worn in New England. War bonnets (known from movies) teach children that Native Americans are exotic and primitive; imply a belligerent nature; ignore the sacred status of feathers and headdresses; and, in “holiday” form, portray unrealistic clownish colors that come across as childlike and belittling.

**NO: Wampanoag did not wear war bonnets.**



[Note infantilization of the Indian figure in the left-hand picture and tomahawk—symbol of violence—in the middle depiction.]

**YES: Getting headdresses straight.**



Feather war bonnets, worn by a dozen-plus tribes, including Sioux, Crow, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, and Plains Cree, represent a sacred display of a man’s honor and courage; each feather tells a story. Today, war bonnets are donned for ceremonial purposes. They are a sacred headdress, not a child’s toy or cultural fetish.



More typical for tribes of the Northeast Woodlands were headbands consisting of a finger-woven or beaded deerskin strip with tribal designs on it. A feather or two could be tucked through the back. Turkey, hawk, egret, and crane feathers were used, rarely the eagle feathers of war bonnets. Feathers, while ornamental (worn by men and women alike), also held sacred value.

Sources:

<http://www.native-languages.org/headdresses.htm#headband>

“How teachers are debunking some of the myths about Thanksgiving.” (11/20/2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=At0DUYIICuE> [PBS 8-minute video]

### **Third Corrective: Giving Thanks & the History of the Holiday**

**TIMELINE:**

**12,000 Years**

Giving thanks is integral to the worldview of many Indigenous groups, who abide by a strong reciprocal relationship between the human, plant, and animal communities. Elements of nature are not treated as exploitable resources but as family members to be cared for. Ceremonies, songs, dances, works of art, and

stories honor and thank game animals, crops, fish, berries, and roots. In Wampanoag belief, a creator (not god) encompasses every aspect of life. Every day is a designated day of thanks.

### **1621**

As noted above, there is no evidence that a deliberate “Thanksgiving” feast between Colonists and Wampanoag people ever took place. In fact, only one mention is made by a colonist (Edward Wilson) in a letter home, but this record was not known during the ensuing centuries.

### **1690s -1800**

*“The original Pilgrims had been very skeptical of regular holy days [which were] associated with the perceived abuses of Catholicism. [...] By the 1690s they had adopted a pattern of annual springtime Fast Days, to beseech God’s blessing on the crop about to be planted, and autumn Thanksgiving Days, in which they thanked the Lord for the harvest [...] The celebration of regular autumn Thanksgivings spread across New England in the eighteenth century [...] It became a beloved holiday, but one not linked to the Pilgrims.”* (R.T. McKenzie, *The First Thanksgiving*)

### **1769**

Descendants of Puritans, seeing that their cultural authority in the colonies was lapsing, started to plant seeds of the idea that pilgrims were the founding fathers of the nation.

### **1841**

Rev. Alexander Young locates the Wilson letter. In a footnote in *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers*, he opines that Wilson described “the first Thanksgiving.” The idea spread as the nation struggled to unify,

### **1863**

Abraham Lincoln names November 26 “Thanksgiving Day” in honor of the Union victory at Gettysburg, having been urged on for years by Sarah Hale, an influential editor of popular magazines for women. She invents and disseminates the version of the “traditional” Thanksgiving dinner still served today.

The idealized, fictional story of Thanksgiving ignores a long history of violence and dispossession of Indigenous lands and has permitted Americans with European heritage to feel satisfied in the belief that their people have come by wealth and well-being honestly.

See: <https://faithandamericanhistory.wordpress.com/tag/reverend-alexander-young>