

Earth-Centered Traditions

Lesson 7: Wampanoag Thanksgiving

11.14.2021

Objectives: Exploring the Wampanoag and so-called “First Thanksgiving.”

Materials: Laptop/DVD of “1621: Beyond the Myth of the First Thanksgiving,” lesson attachments.

Time allotments: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins):

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What’s your favorite Thanksgiving food?
 - ▶ List names of places in MN you’re familiar with that have Lakota, Ojibwe, or other Native American names.
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Opening Activity: A Thanksgiving Scene (5 minutes)

Invite youth to consider a familiar Thanksgiving scene from American painter, Jean Louis Gerome Ferris (attached painting):

- What story do you think this painting is trying to tell?
- From whose point of view and for what purpose(s) is the scene portrayed?
- Whose perspective is still largely left out of the American “Thanksgiving” culture?

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (A prayer of gratitude from the people of the Onondaga Iroquois nation)

“To the Earth, mother of all, greetings and thanks; to all the waters, waterfalls and rain, rivers and oceans, greetings and thanks.

To all the fish life, greetings and thanks; the grains and greens, beans and berries; as one we send thanks to food plants, medicine herbs of the world, and their keepers, greetings and thanks.

The trees for shelter and shade, fruit and beauty, greetings and thanks.

To all birds large and small, joyful, greetings and thanks. And from the four directions, the four winds, thank you for purifying the air we breathe and giving us strength; greetings.

And now the sun, for the light of a new day and all the fires of life, greetings and thanks.

To our oldest grandmother, the moon, leader of women all over the world; and the stars for their mystery, beauty and guidance, greetings and thanks.

To our teachers, from all times reminding us of how to live in harmony, greetings and thanks.

And for all the gifts of creation, for all the love around us, greetings and thanks.

And for that which is forgotten, we remember. We end our words; now our minds are one.”

4. The Wampanoag (pronunciation: wam-pa-nog) and The First Thanksgiving (10 minutes)

We may be surprised to learn that what we call “The First Thanksgiving” was not really a “thanksgiving” at all to the people who were there!

Hand out attachment, “The Wampanoag and the First Thanksgiving.” Invite youth volunteers to read aloud one portion at a time:

- The history of Thanksgiving goes much further back than Plymouth 1621. In fact, people across the world from every culture have been celebrating and giving thanks for thousands of years. Long before English colonists arrived, Native People celebrated many different days of thanksgiving. “Strawberry Thanksgiving” and “Green Corn Thanksgiving” are just two of kinds of celebrations for the Wampanoag (pronunciation: wam-pa-nog) and other Native People.
- One of the earlier contacts between the Wampanoag and Europeans dates from the 16th century, when merchant vessels and fishing boats traveled along the coast of present-day New England. Captains of merchant vessels captured Native Americans and sold them as slaves for profit.
- For example, Captain Thomas Hunt captured a Patuxet named Squanto (or Tisquantum) in 1614, and sold him to Spanish monks who tried to convert him. Eventually Squanto was set free. Despite his prior experiences, he again boarded an English ship to accompany an expedition to Newfoundland as a translator. From Newfoundland he made his way back to his homeland in 1619, only to discover that the entire Patuxet tribe and his family had fallen victim to an epidemic.
- In 1620, religious separatists and others from England who are known today as “Pilgrims” arrived in present-day Plymouth, MA, where Squanto and other Wampanoags taught the starving Pilgrims how to cultivate corn, farm squash and beans, catch fish, and collect seafood.

- In 1621, the English colonists at Plymouth had a three-day feast to celebrate their first harvest. More than 90 native Wampanoag People joined the 50 English colonists in the festivities. Historians do not know for sure why the Wampanoag joined the gathering or what activities went on for those three days. From the one short paragraph that was written about the celebration at the time, we know that they ate, drank, and played games. (Back in England, English people celebrated harvest by feasting and playing games in much the same way.)
- The English did not call the 1621 event a “thanksgiving.” Their understanding of a day of “thanksgiving” would have meant a day of prayer to thank God when something really good happened. So the “pilgrims” actually had their first thanksgiving in the summer of 1623, when they gave thanks for the rain that ended a long drought.
- Contemporary celebrations of the Thanksgiving holiday focus on the idea that the “first Thanksgiving” was a friendly gathering of two disparate groups—or even neighbors—who shared a meal and lived harmoniously. In actuality, the gathering of these people had much more to do with political alliances, diplomacy, and an effort at temporary peaceful coexistence.

5. **Film Viewing: “1621, Beyond the Myth of the First Thanksgiving”** (15 minutes)

- Watch DVD (12 minutes)
- Ask a few youth to briefly share what new information they learned from the film.

6. **A First Nations Perspective on Thanksgiving** (20 minutes)

Invite volunteers to read aloud “popcorn” style so that the class can listen to an alternative perspective from Jacqueline Keeler (attached).

Questions for discussion:

- How do you feel knowing that for Native Americans, Thanksgiving is tinged by bitterness and oppression?
- Reflect on these basic ways human beings relate with one another and with the Earth: **Taking, Trading, Sharing, and Giving**. (Keeler’s article contains many references.) What wisdom can we take from reflecting on that meeting between the Wampanoag and the English that is as relevant today as it was then?
- Thanksgiving is a complicated story with many themes: hunger, food, slavery, friendship, land ownership, religious conflict, and more. But Keeler points out that the word “thanksgiving” points to what is in the heart, and that this celebration is about the story of our heart. What do you think about Thanksgiving as a holiday where we tell the stories of our hearts?

- Should we continue to celebrate Thanksgiving the way we do? If you could, how would you celebrate Thanksgiving differently?

7. **Say goodbye until next time:** Extinguish the chalice, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

8. **Help clean up classroom** before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets