

SAYING GRACE

by [Birmingham Unitarian Church](#) on Saturday, December 3, 2011 at 5:38pm

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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I once read that more food fights occur at Thanksgiving than any other time of year—not the sort of food fights that erupt in school cafeterias, fights with food, but fights over food, where food becomes an object of contention.

Apparently the dishes set out on our Thanksgiving tables have an extraordinary significance for us. If someone proposes an alternate menu, we are likely to respond with a fierce resistance.

My childhood Thanksgivings included typical Southern fare of that era: cornbread dressing with the turkey, green bean and condensed mushroom soup casserole, sweet potatoes, a fruit salad generously laced with marshmallows, pecan pie alongside the predictable pumpkin. When I experienced my first Thanksgiving dinner outside Texas, as a Chicago graduate student, I was startled to encounter such exotic dishes as asparagus, a Caesar salad, and mince pie (along with the predictable pumpkin). The dinner tasted fine, but had a decidedly un-Thanksgiving quality.

Newly married, in my first home, I set out to recreate the Thanksgiving dinner I had known as a child, a real Thanksgiving dinner, only to find my former husband thwarting me at every turn with such expectations as white bread stuffing rather than cornbread, mashed potatoes rather than sweet, vegetable salad rather than fruit. When he asked for apple pie in lieu of pumpkin, I threatened to

cancel all dinner plans and head to my parents' home for a real Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving may be our least commercialized, most traditional holiday. With Christmas co-opted by the toy and gift industry, Easter demanding candy and new clothes, New Year's Day given over to parties the night before and football all day long, and the 4th of July an odd mix of fireworks and politics, Thanksgiving has managed to keep its basic features in place, beyond the reach of any particular religion or culture or government. The way we prepare the dinner may have changed over time, but the content of that dinner and the associations it evokes remain constant.

Along with specific foods, Thanksgiving often comes with specific rituals, and in my Texas family that meant saying grace in a particular way before we began to eat. My father asked all of us in turn to offer a prayer, and he concluded it with a lengthy reflection on the year's blessings, God's providence, our failures to appreciate goodness, our resolve to live more uprightly. Sitting through this ritual became agonizing: after hours of cooking smells wafting through the house, we could hardly wait to dive into the food. In an effort to speed things along, my siblings and I shortened our prayers, condensing them to a brief sentence, but to no avail. My father just made his prayer longer.

One year my grandfather, himself a Baptist pastor, came to our home for Thanksgiving dinner. I felt my heart sink when the requisite table grace ritual began, for I knew pastors to be notoriously longwinded. We'd be lucky to be eating in an hour, I thought bitterly. Hence my amazement when my grandfather, the final one to speak, offered as his prayer, "Lord in Heaven bless us, and keep us all alive; there's ten of us for dinner, and food enough for five." My father was not amused.

Commitment to a menu, commitment to a ritual:

Thanksgiving draws us into traditions that claim us year after year, persisting long after other traditional practices

have vanished. Whether the persons invited (certain aunts and uncles, only maternal grandparents since the paternal grandparents get Christmas), the place observed (always my home, always a sibling's home), the time dinner is served (he wants a midday meal, she prefers to eat at dusk), the way the day is spent (watching football games, going to a movie, putting up holiday lights), the food served, or the pre-dinner blessing, Thanksgiving unfolds predictably. If something requires a change in Thanksgiving patterns—weather disrupts travel, illness makes cooking impossible, divorce or death results in an empty chair at the table—the emotional reactions to the change can be considerable. Over the years changes in the tradition do occur, but slowly, allowing assimilation before shifting again. The same people, place, hour, activities, food, prayer before eating, lasting over time.

Perhaps one reason traditions have taken such strong hold at Thanksgiving time, insisting that it be observed in particular ways, comes from a reaching towards a kind of spiritual balance. My dread of those long prayers before the feast, my eagerness to skip the table grace that would include expressions of gratitude so I could hurry up and dig in, our present culture's rush past Thanksgiving into Christmas so that now we have Christmas decorations and Christmas sales starting not on "Black Friday" but earlier in the month of November: I wonder if these trends result from our having no great love of saying grace, of preferring football and pumpkin pie to reflection on the meaning of the holiday, because we do not easily acknowledge or rest in the experience that gives rise to gratitude and giving thanks, namely the experience of humility and neediness. To be grateful requires recognizing that I have not done it all myself, nor could I ever do it all myself because I am imperfect and not in charge.

God is great

God is good

Let us thank Him for our food

Good food
Good wine
Good God:
Let's dine.

O Spirit of Life, we give thanks for food and remember the hungry
We give thanks for health and remember the sick
We give thanks for friends and remember the friendless
We give thanks for freedom and remember the enslaved

This food is the gift of the whole universe,
The earth, the sky, and much hard work:
May we live in a way that makes us
Worthy to receive it.

You may remember times when you cared for a child, or were yourself a child, trying to teach or to learn to say thanks. A birthday present is received, a store clerk offers a balloon, another child shares a toy, and the prompt comes, "Kathy, say thank you." Prompting has to continue for some years before the lesson can be internalized and the child responds with a spontaneous thanks. To feel, and give expression to, gratitude requires an awareness of one's limits, an awareness that children (and adults) do not reach easily, if ever. I first have to realize—and accept—that I cannot do everything, be everything, know everything, that I am vulnerable and often afraid, that I fail. Until that realization has settled in, deep inside my heart, so that I know it past all self-deception—until then, I cannot really see what another is offering me, much less accept it or feel grateful for it. My capacity for gratitude grows in proportion to the shrinking of my ego.

The familiar story of the first Thanksgiving, not yet so named, came after colonists here had seen their ranks

depleted almost in half and had endured a winter the likes of which they had never experienced before. Those who did survive owed their survival to the generous assistance of Native Americans who taught these newcomers skills they would need to flourish in this country. After a first successful harvest, a celebratory feast seemed in order, and all were invited—not just immediate family and friends, but everyone who could be reached was included. Sitting around a loaded table, sharing food as immigrants with the locals, the colonists had a clear reminder of their vulnerability, how very much they had depended on the kindness of strangers to keep them alive. Few experiences of gratitude can be so powerful as the gratitude owed to someone who has saved your life. And it became important not to ever forget that vulnerability, that dependence, that gratitude.

Yet now we are encouraged to do just that: to hide our vulnerability under a façade of competence, to set aside our dependence in favor of being independent, to consume and consume more, with the result that Thanksgiving as a celebration of gratitude gets buried in food and football and an increasing rush towards Christmas. In contemporary culture it can be easy to forget our own times of pain and limitation and oppression. It can be easy, because our daily lives may not often bring us into contact with them, those whose existence as refugees from poverty and hardship and injustice and prejudice remind us of our vulnerability, those times when we were struggling with circumstances beyond our control. It can be easy to forget, in a liberal and progressive church, that along with our individual capacity to discern truth, our goodness and light, we also carry within us a real darkness, an ability to deny and subvert truth to serve our own ends, to regard ourselves as having more worth than another. And with all this forgetting, the roots of gratitude in experiencing ourselves as limited and dependent seem far away. As Jewish author Elie Wiesel

observed, “No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night.”

With Thanksgiving now behind us, we are plunged headlong into the holiday season of gifts and giving—and also receiving, which may be the most difficult part of the exchange. Perhaps this is why it is important that the meaning of Thanksgiving, the observance of the day itself, not get lost in the rush to Christmas: we need first to rediscover why it is vital for our spiritual health to experience gratitude, to feel our dependence on the goodness of others, of life itself, of whatever we may call God, for most of what comes our way. Sort of like saying “thanks” first, prior to receiving something, we mark Thanksgiving as a necessary prerequisite in order to fully savor the abundant gifts that come with Hanukkah and Christmas, the return of light that comes with solstice time.

First gratitude, reminding us of our need for one another, then the season of giving in celebration of the presence of one another in our lives and our ability to love.

So each year when I settle in at the Thanksgiving table and admire the feast spread before me; or when I pull open the curtains each morning to admit the daylight; or when I look across the sanctuary at your faces each Sunday; or whenever any of us can recognize all that comes our way which we did not create, did not earn, perhaps do not deserve, may we say grace: silently or aloud, to another person, to the open sky, to the God outside or beyond or within, words of gratitude for being given to, over and over, blessings without end.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth

day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

(e. e. cummings)