

Thanksgiving Reflections: Living with Two Hearts

Linda and I live very close to the location of the first Thanksgiving celebration shared between the native Nauset Tribe of the Wampanoag Confederation and the Pilgrims. By all accounts, including those of the local tribes, the interactions between these two radically different cultures were mutually beneficial and supportive for a long time. The daughter of the highest Indian chief even married the son of one of the founders of the new community. Fifty years later, betrayed by greed and fear, the perhaps inevitable clash of cultures led to war.

At First Encounter Beach, ten minutes from our home, I picture the shocking meeting of "the other". That it did not evoke violence from either side is remarkable. Imagine the moment when the pilgrims encounter the natives, who were celebrating on the beach, enjoying the large fish they just caught in the bountiful waters. Imagine the native's shock upon seeing these strange boats and oddly dressed white men. While wary of each other, curiosity was stronger than fear. Both sides chose not to kill with musket or bow and arrow. A recent Wampanoag chief, Chief Flying Eagle, speaks of the adeptness, flexibility and balance needed for these encounters, he called it "feet in two canoes, walking in the outside world while honoring their native traditions".

Still the story is one of two hearts. There is the gratitude for the Thanksgiving feast where the two cultures celebrated their survival without overlooking the ensuing betrayals. Ironically, mutual support had been made possible because years earlier one of the natives, Squanto, had been kidnapped by English adventurers. After being taken to London, he managed to escape, returning to his homeland. His presence allowed for the communication and interconnections. Joy and sorrow interlinked.

Why this long story?

As I grow older, I notice the inseparability of Joy and Sorrow, Gratitude and Forgiveness. For me, the spirit of Thanksgiving is incomplete without the wholehearted thankfulness for all that we are given, along with acknowledgment of the suffering that is part of our human condition. This is not a negative impulse; rather, sorrow wedded to understanding and forgiveness, opens and deepens our hearts.

We live with two hearts or two doorways into our True heart. The front door is gratitude for life itself. Do you sometimes sense the miracle that you are alive and that you are conscious of that fact? As Einstein said of this life, "either everything is a miracle or nothing is". When we are grateful for life itself, then all the gifts we are given everyday – the warmth of the sun, the smile of a friend, food, water - are extra bonuses.

Joy and Gratitude are intimately connected. When not lost in a sense of entitlement, while experiencing a joyful moment, we respond with gratitude. We sense that we are being given a gift. A less recognized truth is that gratitude itself – cultivating this capacity - evokes more and more joyful moments. It works both ways. Thankfully, an "attitude of gratitude" is a learnable and remarkably life-giving approach to daily life.

The back door of sorrow and forgiveness is harder to describe. I think of it is three ways:

- First, when I look back on my life, I notice that often, the various moments of suffering have led to the most profound learning and growth. For example, my two horrific car accidents, with the consequent damage to my body, paved the way for my life as a healer and teacher. When I have the larger, birds eye view of my life, I feel thankful for the trials that led to this moment. Genuinely having this attitude furthers the opening of the heart.

- Second, when suffering or sorrow leads to forgiveness, the heart opens more widely. Without forgiveness, we live in resentment and separation. As the saying goes: "when we hold onto resentment, two people eat poison and we eat it first". To forgive ourselves for our misdeeds requires a commitment to make it better. To forgive others, requires seeing their suffering. As I learned many years ago: "hurt people, hurt people". People who can forgive life's transgressions, rarely intentionally hurt another. Learning to authentically forgive opens the heart and, surprisingly is a pathway to greater joy. Our burdened hearts become lighter and more permeable to happiness. Now, this forgiveness cannot be superficial or forced, it must be deep and true. This also is a learnable capacity.

- Third, another aspect of the back door to our heart is that suffering and sorrow can lead us to greater appreciation for the little things in life. As hospice workers attest, dying people are often extremely grateful of the simple things – ice on parched lips or a smile from a loved one. When one

has been in intense pain, the easing of those sensations can be the cause of great joy. When the sun emerges after many gray days, the heart leaps.

Of course, these statements come from a person of privilege – I am not a parent unable to feed their child nor am I currently experiencing great hardship. Still, in my travels to many cultures, often the poorest people appreciate life more than the richest. Gratitude for our lives, though influenced by external circumstances, is not fundamentally **caused** by them.

I think again of the Pilgrims choosing to start a new life in an unknown world, surviving a harrowing journey across the great ocean. I think of the Natives who at first welcomed the new arrivals. I am stunned by the fifty years of relative harmony and mutuality. The ensuing betrayals, caused by the greed for land and wealth, is less shocking. I picture how surreal the first Thanksgiving must have been. As I look at the world today, I wonder what will it take for human beings, you and me, to feel radically grateful for the great abundance we are given, to forgive, in the right moment, all transgressions AND to recognize and care for all "others" who need our support.

Wishing you a thoroughly joyful and reflective Thanksgiving.