

# Thinking About Thanksgiving

Like currency notes, our notes of thanks are only as good as the intentions held in reserve to back them up; they're acknowledgement of the debt owed and a promise to make good by giving back.



Archon Khephra Burns

The Thanksgiving Day dinner is always a feast for the eyes, olfactory and palate: stuffed turkeys and honey-glazed hams, candied yams, baked macaroni and sweet potato pies piled high on tables graciously laid and set in fall colors; a tableau that is iconic of the great wealth that is America. We have much to be thankful for. And, indeed, we follow the practice of culture, from ancient times – from the festivals of Min in ancient Egypt, Demeter in Greece

and Ceres in Rome to the yam festivals in Ghana and Nigeria and Crop Over in the Caribbean – celebrating the fruits of our labors with extended family gatherings, communion and thanksgiving. We offer grace for God's grace, made manifest before us in a cornucopia far exceeding the dreams of the parched and drawn desert tribes of Bible times that wandered in search of a land of milk and honey.

Here we are at last...some of us, made in the image and likeness of America itself, eyes bigger than our stomach, stomach hanging over our belt; the ancient scented smoke of sacrifice once offered up to the gods reduced now to reflex utterances of praise for being "blessed and highly favored." Much like the Pharisee who prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers..." and po' folk, his modern counterpart might add, whose dire circumstance and deprivation are taken today as testament to their weak, inferior faith in the new prosperity gospel. "Thanksgiving," the proper noun of our national day of overindulgence, has all but obscured the original sense of the verb expressing gratitude for all that we have, for the abundant harvests America gathers in more than its share and too often wastes with improvidence.

Nothing much new there. For saving the Pilgrims from certain starvation, the only thanks Native Americans got were

the theft of their lands, a Trail of Tears and blankets infected with smallpox. And black folk have yet to be thanked – much less remunerated – for two hundred-plus years of unpaid labor. Fact is, as the child is father to the man, so too was America, in its juvenile delinquency, father to duplicity and the myth of our great and enduring gratitude, memorialized in the Thanksgiving holiday.

Like currency notes, our notes of thanks are only as good as the intentions held in reserve to back them up. Sincere gratitude is an attitude of obligation for the blessings we receive gratis. It's an acknowledgement of the debt owed and a promise to make good by giving back. The thanks and the giving are two aspects of the same action, integral parts of a whole – thanksgiving – and without the latter the former is as empty and meaningless as a bad check. But nature has its own ways of balancing the books.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) reported recently that we are stripping nature at an unprecedented rate. "We have exceeded the earth's ability to support a consumptive lifestyle," warned Director-General James Leape. "People are turning resources into waste faster than nature can turn waste back into resources... If everyone around the world lived as [we] in America do, we would need five planets to support us." Even with most everyone else using far fewer of the world's resources than we do, current projections forecast that humanity "will be using two planets' worth of natural resources by 2050 – if those resources have not run out by then."

Our government has known of this threat since the 1970s, and its response, as outlined in its own National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM 200), has been, not to use fewer resources, but to focus on ways to depopulate developing countries – India, Brazil, Egypt, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Ethiopia among them – starting with young people who, historically, have been advocates for change and are more likely to confront imperialism. "Mandatory programs" of birth control with the aid of pressure from the World Bank, the bombing of Iraq, our nonintervention in the killing in Darfur and the atrocities of Rwanda, and neglect of the AIDS crisis all over Africa.

Such are the proposals, programs and pogroms of those who thank God they are "not like other men," but Americans, rugged individuals chosen by God and divinely guided, as Bush claims to be, and as the millions of fundamentalist Christians who put him in office claim to be, many of them believing that every step closer to the world's destruction brings them that much closer to the Second Coming and the Rapture. Having made an idol of the persona (Latin for "mask") of Jesus, they are spiritually paralyzed and blind to the distinction that, according to their own religious doctrine, in Jesus, God became man, not *a* man, and in doing so assumed the humanity of all. "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brethren," he cautions in Matthew 25:40, "you have done it unto me." And unto themselves.

Ultimately, not only are we like other men, we are them, our individual personas mere masks of the indwelling Christ that has no lack of opportunities here to give and be truly grateful if only allowed to work through us. And so, doing unto others is doing unto ourselves. Giving is also receiving, and thanking is simultaneously being thanked. In the words of the great Gwendolyn Brooks: "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond."