

Plymouth as a Symbol

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Thanksgiving Day in Plymouth, Massachusetts is a day when the hopes, dreams and troubles of our nation find expression. Plymouth has become the symbol of our highest aspirations and our most grievous transgressions. Symbols are important to focus the mind and emotions. A symbol can uplift us, it can take us down; it can bring us together, and it can separate us.

For most, Plymouth on Thanksgiving symbolizes a time of peace, of friendship and thanksgiving. It calls families to come together to feast and be thankful. It inspires a nation whose origin story is one of the quest for freedom and a bridging of cultures. It is a symbol of birth, of something new. For others it symbolizes the end of an era, the end of a way of life that had been operating freely on this land for millennia. This is a significant dichotomy, confusion from a core wound of a nation that perceives itself as an exemplar of democracy - allegedly pluralistic, with every nation of the world and every religion represented and respected here.

But on Thanksgiving, the American Indian is crying out to be heard. The Native American who is barely noticed before or after the third week in November; who all but disappeared from the pages American history after King Phillip's War until the present when they stand up to be noticed on Thanksgiving Day in Plymouth. The First Americans who now have an equal voice at Plimoth Plantation, the living museum in Plymouth, perhaps even a dominant voice there. Who is the American Indian? What role have they played in the evolution of America before, during and after that harvest celebration in the fall of 1621?

In our zeal to create a symbol with Plymouth and Thanksgiving we have lost the facts of the actual circumstances that occurred so long ago. We have not taken the time to look closely at the hearts of the people who played out the birthing of a nation.

Who were the Mayflower Pilgrims who arrived in Plymouth that November of 1620? A small ship of 102 people - mothers, fathers and children - 50 of whom were seeking to start a nation based upon freedom of conscience, freedom to relate to the divine individually through direct experience - seeking to establish "a pure and democratic church." These Separatists (importantly distinguished from the Puritans who came later) - farmers and Cambridge-educated individuals - who escaped from England to Holland - had read the Bible (newly translated into English) and had discovered that God intended for humanity to live in freedom. In England they committed treason by leaving the Church of England which they found to be corrupt and inappropriate, were jailed by King James, published seditious books against the king- did everything in their power to challenge the status quo. Do we have that kind of courage today? Are we willing to go to jail for what we believe in? Henry Thoreau did. Who else has? Martin Luther King, Gandhi, John Lennon, JFK, RFK all died for seeing a higher truth and acting upon that vision.

Who did the tiny band of English rebels encounter upon their arrival in the New World? The American Indian with whom they shared much common ground in religious understanding and in their connection to the earth.

In conversation with Conbatant, Wampanoag leader, at the time of the Massasoit Ousa Mequin's near-death in 1623 Edward Winslow in *Good News From New England* relates: "Here upon I took occasion to tell them of God's works of creation and preservation, of his laws and ordinances...I also told them, that whatsoever good things we had, we received from God, as the author and giver thereof; and therefore craved his blessing upon that we had...This all of them concluded to be very well; and said, they believed almost all the same things, and that the same power that we called God, they called *Kiehtan*." Earlier that day Winslow had saved the Massasoit's life with an herbal remedy.

Oddly enough, the Pilgrims came to Plymouth - in error, perhaps - as they were heading for northern Virginia - in Plymouth they encountered an Indian, Squanto, who had lived honorably in England, who spoke English and who was living with a strong leader of high vision, Ousa Mequin, the Massasoit of the Pokanoket Wampanoags. Hobbomock, who later lived near the Pilgrims as Massasoit's emissary spoke to Winslow describing the Massasoit at the time of the Massasoit's near death: "My loving sachim, my loving sachim! Many have I known, but never any like thee." and turning to [Winslow] said whilst [you] lived, [you] should never see his like amongst the Indians..."

The inspired leaders of these two cultures created a peace treaty upon their first meeting three months after the arrival of the Mayflower. A treaty of peace and friendship that was to last 50 years. The simple farming folk from England, who knew the land, how to honor the land and live from the land, who sought freedom to relate directly to the divine, met a culture who also lived from the land and honored the land and whose way of life reflected a direct connection with the Creator. From the outset they shared food, they shared knowledge. In the first days the Pilgrims often fed the Indians. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant Indian corn - something the Pilgrims had not seen in England.

Within a few short years thousands of Puritans came from England to settle New England. They came to Cape Ann, settled Salem, Boston and formed The Massachusetts Bay Company/Colony, a business venture as well as a colony. These were moneyed people of vision seeking prosperity in a new land. Conflicts began between cultures, the Puritan did not share the commonalities enjoyed by the Mayflower Pilgrims and the Wampanoags in Plymouth - there was an unbridgeable chasm between cultures that led to war by 1675 and a subsequent divergence of understanding that has continued to this day.

Plymouth Plantation became absorbed into The Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Indian became marginalized, much as the Separatists had been in England, but in the evolution of democracy on American soil both the Indian and the Separatist ideals were to play a significant role.

The principles of self-governance - equal and just laws serving the common good - that were the driving principles of the Mayflower Pilgrims - articulated in The Mayflower Compact in the cabin of the Mayflower before they landed in Provincetown Harbor, became the inspiring principles 150 years later as a fledgling nation attempted to gain independence and draft a document that would guide a free people in the evolution of a nation - with a government of the people, by the people and for the people. The creation of this document, The United States Constitution, which was to bring 13 independent states together, took in concepts already in practice amongst the five nations of the Iroquois who had combined sovereign tribes together in confederacy hundreds of years prior.

The quest for freedom of the individual to decide his own fate, religiously and politically had a jump start in Plymouth with Indians and settlers living together, working together to maintain peace. Visionary leaders taking the high road with their people. The American Spirit had been born. The American Mind was developing as something radically different from the mentality of the European on the continent. Now, many generations later what do we as Americans profoundly influenced by these visionary people do with the heritage they gave us as articulated in our freedom documents - The Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution. Are we ready to listen to the voices of the Native American and the Pilgrim visionaries and use Plymouth as a symbol to draw us together to walk forward into our highest potential ?

Let us join hands this Thanksgiving as brothers and sisters, as family, and do as the great Ousa Mequin and the Pilgrim leaders did long ago. Let us feast from the common table of love, friendship and the birthright of the human spirit to be free.