

## Thanksgiving

November 18, 2007

Whether by accident, a storm, pilot error or sheer exhaustion we will probably never know, suggests the author James Loewen in Lies my Teachers Taught Me, but a small band of Strangers, the name for the none religious folk traveling with the Pilgrims arrived off the shore of New England. This group later formed the settlement of Plymouth. The home of the first permanent non native dwellers in the northern hemisphere.

Let me tell you about a legendary figure from that time and let this become a jumping off point for thinking about those things for which we are thankful.

Squanto becomes a key figure in the story of the settlement. Most likely Squanto had been captured, along with about two dozen other fellow Indians, by a ship Captain in the early 1600's, 20 years before the Pilgrims came over on the Mayflower and sold into slavery in Spain. Squanto managed to escape and made his way back to England. We do not know a lot about his time in England and Europe except that at one point he was in the employ of a Plymouth England merchant who helped arrange for the finance of the Mayflower. Squanto learned the language and customs of the Europeans, thus becoming an important commodity to the growing trade business with the Native settlers in the new country. It is thus no surprise that in 1619 he was able to talk a ship captain into bringing him back to his home country on a cross ocean voyage. Though he was from the Cape Cod area he first stop home was not there but further north where hunting, trapping and fishing was an already lucrative and rapidly expanding business to and from England. Squanto latched on to some traders and trappers from there that were traveling south and he went with them heading toward his home and birth place late in the year 1620. He walked into this home village to make the horrendous discovery that all his family

members from the Penobscot tribe had been wiped out by a plague and that the Pilgrims had settled in that once thriving village – soon to be named Plymouth. Squanto not surprisingly threw himself into the doings of the village and had at best a tenuous relationship with them. After arriving to find no village, no relatives, no trace of this family he chose to become part of the Pilgrim community. This is not unlike what many of us do, when all other supports are gone, we find a new community to become a part of. We hear of his assistance in helping the Pilgrims survive those first years, no doubt this was true, and William Bradford, praised Squanto for “bringing them to unknown places for their profit”, however Squanto did cause numerous problems for the Natives in the area and the Pilgrims and Strangers in the village and surrounding area. Yet without Squanto’s relationship with other Native persons living in the area the Plymouth village would not have survived their first years and never would the villagers and the Indians have been able to sit together and share a feast and offer a thanksgiving in the fall of 1621. This feast has become the archetype feast which we celebrate each November. There is historic documentation to support that this feast actually occurred, though we need to avoid falling into the Hallmark glorified vision of it, it was a far simpler religious festival and sharing of meal communion than it is popularized as.<sup>1</sup>

Squanto was the go between with the leaders of Plymouth colony and the great Indian chief Massasoit, the father of the man whom we came to call King Philip. The native dwellers, and there were probably more than 7 different tribes on the Cape, knew every move the Pilgrims were making, some wanted to out and out attack and kill all the settlers, after all there was a long history of death, plague, ruthless murder and destruction arriving with those European men, some of the tribes had decided to be indifferent to them, some were trying to decide whether or not to align

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<sup>1</sup> Mayflower: a story of Courage, Community and War. Nathaniel Philbrick Viking Press 2006

themselves with these new arrivals. Massasoit was undecided. In the second year he arranged for a meeting with Edward Winslow, John Carver, Miles Standish and John Bradford using Squanto and another native Samoset who could speak English, as interpreters. It was at this meeting that Massasoit and the Pilgrims worked out a six point agreement to assure peace in the area. The six points in brief are 1. Neither party should injure or harm the others people. 2. If any did cause harm the offender should be sent to the other for punishment. 3. No tools or supplies were to be taken during from one another and if they were must be returned. (as an aside one of the reckless and most foolish things the earlier Pilgrims did was to disrespectfully dig up graves while looking for food stuff that had been buried for storage and in one instance when they found a buried stash of corn they took it all, leaving the returning tribe without sustenance when they moved back to the summer camp) 4. Each would aid the other if unjust war was waged by another. 5. They would notify neighbor confederates of this agreement thus protecting one another and stating to neighbors that each was watching out for the welfare of the other. 6. That when each came into the settlement of the other all weapons should be left behind.

Unbeknownst to the Pilgrim leaders Squanto had already begun deceitful actions that would eventually result in his death, most likely by poisoning and eventually to such a breakdown in the relationship between the English and Pokanokets'/Wampanoags' that it led to King Philip's war. He did this in subtle and pervasive ways. First, he told Massasoit that the English kept the plague in barrels buried beneath their storehouses and that the English could unleash this at any time. Squanto continued his subtle reign of fear and subterfuge all the while jockeying to become the new Sachem or Chief. It is well documented that he fed misinformation to both sides and tried to create rifts and power bases that would overcome Massasoit and put himself in position of power. And he was responsible for

the death of one leader of the Indians and was not turned over to them for fitting punishment, a direct violation of the earlier agreement. It is no error that Squanto named himself for the Indian spirit of darkness, the spirit of the underworld, the Chaos monster. He made himself indispensable to the villagers in Plymouth. And as Nathaniel Philbrook, in a most interesting book **Mayflower**, writes. "Squanto was on his way to becoming the one person in New England they (the Pilgrims) could not live without."<sup>2</sup>

The stage was set for the event we call the First Thanksgiving. An event fraught with emotional baggage that we have not ever been quite able to sort out. In some ways that thanksgiving feast was the best of times because soon after the relationship between the natives, the Pilgrims, and the newly arriving Puritans disintegrated beyond repair.

Yet it can fill us with pride that this is the beginning of New England the place we call home.

It can fill us with shame that we accepted the stories fed to us without seeing through the lens of those oppressed and destroyed. We were so innocent and uncritical in our thinking that we failed to ask important questions, continued the myths and ignored ways to heal the rift between the indigenous people and the settlers, our ancestors.

It can fill us with despair and sadness that we continue to make similar mistakes in our attitudes toward the other, failing sometimes to look beyond the obvious differences deeper into the soul experience of sameness.

It can fill us with a sense of satisfaction that humans can overcome adversity and tragedy surviving the horrors of weather, hunger, death, isolation, and still maintain their faith, which has been passed down, though we have certainly rewritten it to our Unitarian Universalist way of thinking. It can fill us with a sense of wonder that the human spirit is so resilient and creative that a small band of persons seeking to build a better place where

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<sup>2</sup> Mayflower p 101

the kindom of God could be built braved all sorts of hardships to stay and form a Godly community.

It can fill us with sadness that millions of native dwellers have been exterminated, sometimes intentionally, sometimes through ignorance and often in the name of God and progress.

It can fill also with a longing for the truth, a longing to grapple with the hard knowledge of those times, a desire to read through the dense and obscure first hand accounts that will give a more accurate picture of the earliest times in New England. It fills us with a wish to be able to honestly and honorably acknowledge that we can learn from the past, that it is okay to point out the failings of the past because then we can use this to better our future, to increase our knowledge, to find common ground, to learn about the sacredness of history, the sacredness of all life and all living beings.

And most of all it fills us with delight that we are given the opportunity at least once a year to name those things for which we are grateful.

What are you most grateful for? Family, friends, health, mental, spiritual stability, a job or profession you love, beautiful surroundings, the glory of nature, the stamina of the human spirit, the blessings unearned that we have heaped upon us. These are some of mine. Enjoy your self this Thursday thanksgiving day and know that you are each and everyone a blessing in my life. So Be it.