

## **“Sharing History, Sharing Bread”**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 21, 2021**

The aroma of turkey filled the air as the tables were set with overflowing piles of scalloped potatoes covered in bubbling cheese, dishes of deep crimson cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes softened with heaps of butter, and, of course, my mother’s stuffing, which was also her mother’s stuffing, and her grandmother’s stuffing, and maybe even her great-grandmother’s stuffing. I remember this Thanksgiving in particular because of the joy of the generations, grandparents positioned at the head of the table surrounded by offspring digging into plates piled with food. A collection of my own generation sat at what was still called the “kid’s” table, seven of us packed around a tiny table meant for four, sharing one knife between us for reasons of which I have no recollection, laughing and eating and creating such joy it holds a space in my heart over a decade later. This was also the last Thanksgiving I ever spent with one of my ancestors – my maternal Grandfather Shima whom I cherished. This was one of the first Thanksgivings my adopted brother Jonny spent without his mother – an ancestor whom I believe was there with us and her treasured son at that table meant for four in spirit and in memory. We connected with ancestors of the past through food and memory and lived in that liminal space where the next ancestor was poised to enter the realm of whatever comes next.

This is my experience of Thanksgiving, and my connection to inherited food and the ancestors. I venture to guess this recollection may be vaguely familiar to some of those in this space. This holiday is ingrained in the fabric of our culture and our history and yet the story that accompanies it is filled with gaping holes. Pilgrims become the celebrated protagonists in the tale as indigenous experiences are erased or minimized. By the time of the setting of this fabled celebration, huge swaths of indigenous peoples had already perished from unknown diseases brought to the country by Europeans, and this tragic onset would be followed by traumatic displacement and genocide often glossed over in our history books.

Author for the Smithsonian Magazine, Lindsay McVay, recounts a more truthful version of the original story of Thanksgiving. When the pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts, emerging on the rocky shore after a momentous trip across the Atlantic Ocean, they encountered the local Wampanoag tribe, already ravaged by disease. When the pilgrims arrived, the Wampanoag tribe had a tradition of offering thanks by offering great feasts. For a brief period, the interests of the pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe overlapped. The pilgrims needed food, and the Wampanoag needed weapons. Connecting through an indigenous man, who spoke English, of the Patuxet tribe named Tisquantum, they reciprocally fulfilled these needs and a feast of thanks followed – a feast that served to highlight this brief, peaceful coexistence. This encounter was to be followed by centuries of trauma to indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup>

This history, these stories, remain alive as they are passed through the generations. Through story, through art, through tradition, and through food – through grains – through fry bread, a deep-fried dough. Author Kevin Noble Maillard, member of the Seminole Nation, wrote that fry bread is history. Is place. Is nation. Is “us.” He reflects, “The long walk, the stolen land, strangers in our world with unknown food. We made new recipes from what we had.” In Oklahoma, Georgia, Colorado. The Abenaki, the Navajo, the Sioux. Through this bread made from the scraps they were offered, through this dish passed down through the generations, Maillard and those in his tradition claim “We are still here!” Fry bread becomes much more than those basic ingredients that comprise it.<sup>2</sup>

Each of us today was invited to bring a grain dish that carries within it more than those basic ingredients. And so it was with my Thanksgiving grains, that generations old stuffing filled with cut-up squares of stale sandwich bread. This stale bread – which ordinarily would have been avoided or discarded – instead became a family staple holding us together with one another and our deceased beloveds. Our ancestors, our histories, and the stories that shaped us. We are close to that time of year when the veil between the living and the dead is thin – celebrated

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<sup>1</sup> “Everyone’s history matters: The Wampanoag Indian Thanksgiving story deserves to be known” Lindsay McVay

<sup>2</sup> *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story* by Kevin Noble Maillard

during Samhain. This Thursday's celebration serves as a time to connect with our ancestors as well, as we connect over one of those things that spans the generations – grains, and the stories that accompany it. My husband's cornbread, a recipe gifted directly from his father, Martin, who has since passed and is now an ancestor. In tasting that special grain, memories spontaneously return, and we hear his laughter and recall his witty sense of humor and his dedication to help Eric whenever he needed it. The cornmeal, butter and salt become much more, reminiscent of a history from Martin's hometown of Texas, passed on from ancestors residing in Appalachia, a people in poverty.

While there are powerful stories told through our food, many expressed through the grains kneaded, baked, or fried that we brought with us today, we also carry with us spoken stories, stories told through artwork or pictures or heirlooms. We hold within us those stories that shape and mold us, whether perpetuating goodness or decidedly overcoming harm. When I reflect on my own family history, through all of the stories I have been told, or that are held within the pictures lining the walls at my parent's houses, or that are held in the family heirlooms sitting in my mother's living room, I reminisce on my mother's lineage – on generations of people who had suffered, each successive generation working to provide a better life for their children. I hold this legacy deep within me and use it as inspiration to better my own life.

Sometimes it is those we have never met that have the greatest impact on us – their stories interwoven with our own to become a legend for those in successive generations. I think of my stepfather, Al, a Black man raised in the American south in the forties and fifties. The story that shaped him was that of his father, who had been shot and killed by a white man before Al was even born. This haunted him, and yet this tale did not end with death. Al's story is shaped not by words or food or pictures or anything tangible but by a spiritual event. Long ago, he traveled South to visit his father's grave. Standing on the earth before that gravestone marked with his father's name, he cried. Tears fell down his cheeks for his grieving family, and for the man whose blood ran through his veins and yet whom he had never met. Eyes closed, he saw his father – he saw him laughing, and he saw him shot, he saw his father falling into his arms and

falling into his life. In that moment, he felt compelled to reach down to the earth and touch the dirt to his forehead. His tears of sorrow mixed with tears of joy as he met his father for the very first time. Both the murder of his father and the encounter of meeting him at his grave shaped how my stepfather lived his life as a father, a stepfather, an academic, an author, a husband – as a being. It shaped his core and molded him – from the man he was at that grave to his ultimate death. His identity – as is each and every one of ours – was shaped by stories; was shaped by ancestors.

We heard Pam read the words earlier of author Alice Walker. “To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> We can remember this each Thanksgiving, each Bread Communion, each time we join together as a sacred community to share our breads and the stories they hold. Each aspect of ourselves was shaped by those who came before, intermixed and interwoven with our own choices and decisions. Who our parents were and who their guardians were shaped the morals we had been taught in our early years. Perhaps generational stories of survival help us persevere, or stories of tragedy help us to work hard not to perpetuate. They shape and form all aspects of who we are today - influencing even the food that touches our lips.

Our Story for all Ages told another story passed down, this one a story of words, of language. Of a cherished indigenous grandfather whose language – Cree – had been stolen from him, and of a granddaughter who exclaimed, “I found your words, grandpa!” – pages and pages of them.<sup>4</sup> What one generation lost was discovered yet again generations later. The same story of hardship and survival is remembered and honored each time that dough is dropped in boiling oil and fry bread is made. That exclamation of the Seminole author “We are here!”

Ancestry is not a line, not even a tree, but a web, interwoven across millennia and spanning each continent. We heard earlier: “We do not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand of

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<sup>3</sup> *Soul Matters Worship Packet November 2021*

<sup>4</sup> *Stolen Words* by Melanie Florence

it.”<sup>5</sup> Interconnected, all of us, through overlapping stories bridging generations. We are interconnected beyond our individual lives and the lives of our descendants to all living things – our Unitarian Universalist faith tells us this. This is what Chief Seattle tells us – “we belong to the earth.” There is ancestry in the land, stories told through canyons crafted by centuries of water cutting through rock, or mountains reaching to the sky as those giant plates below us inch closer and closer together – what or who the earth is today crafted by all that has come before – and all that is. Interconnected, we are fed from the earth and in turn we feed the earth. Our bodies emerged from the earth and to the earth we will each return – conscious beings cycling through with the inanimate. Our own grain is a product of this earth, product of dirt and water and nutrients, what ultimately becomes the script on to which we write our stories.

Unitarian Universalist Burton Carley wonders if the earth remembers its history, whether the “oak tree remembers its planting,” or “the squirrel remembers last fall’s gathering” or if “the night remembered the moon.” He posits that “Perhaps that is the reason for *our* births -- to be the memory for creation.”<sup>6</sup> We remember the acorn, the white sphere in the sky that is the moon. We are here to hold the memories of the earth – so all that was created is not forgotten, so all that has been overcome will not be in vain. To remember the traditional Cree words, or the memories of all those indigenous tribes who lost their lives – held on to and cherished by the generations that survived them. We remember the recipes of those who overcame poverty in Appalachia or grant ourselves the opportunity for a murdered father to give strength and meaning to his son. We share the stories that keep history alive.

What is key to our lives – to each life – is history, remembered through story. This we celebrate every day. But today – this day – we share the stories of our grain dishes. Perhaps strung from tales of survival, whether the indigenous story of fry bread or the unleavened bread of Passover. Perhaps tales of celebration and joy. Of connecting with those who have passed,

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<sup>5</sup> Chief Seattle

<sup>6</sup> *Soul Matters Worship Packet November 2021*

sharing the cornbread of our forebears. We remember childhood memories, or the traditions of a people of faith. We remember our ancestors, many of whom arrived from countries far away, carrying with them their own cuisines. We carry with us stories that shape us and stories that sustain us. This is what we bring today. A web of stories birthed from the very earth. The purpose of our lives – tales to keep alive the “memory of creation.”<sup>7</sup>

The aroma of turkey filled the air, that last Thanksgiving with my grandfather. Grandpa Shima, may you live on forever in story.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> *Soul Matters Worship Packet November 2021*, excerpt from Burton Carley