

A True American Thanksgiving

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Thanksgiving is my family's favorite holiday. The celebration spans two days and centers around spending time with my grandmother and cousins. Cooking is a big part of our tradition and each of my cousins are in charge of a different part of the meal. Before dinner, we all join hands and share the things that we are thankful for. The holiday is full of new faces and new traditions every year, but that is what makes it special to us.

The day before Thanksgiving, my cousin, my sister, and I go to my grandmother's house to prepare the ingredients. She cooks us dinner and we go over the main dishes and sides on a yellow sticky-note. My grandmother triple checks the list and puts us to work as soon as we are done eating dinner. While my cousin makes the cranberry crunch, I dice the vegetables for the stuffing. The process used to take hours, but as we have grown up, we manage to finish prepping in under an hour.

We return in the morning to walk through Downtown Sunnyvale. In the cafe at the corner of the street, we all order hot chocolates to keep our hands warm. My grandmother carries a brown paper bag and we begin hunting for the best fall leaves strewn across the street and in the gutters. She insists on checking each one before adding it to the bag. When we find enough leaves to decorate the house, she takes us home for the final prep. The appetizers are placed on plates, and dishes are lined up to be popped in the oven. I walk through the living room and carefully place the leaves around the room. My grandmother gives us the final approval and then we all go home to get dressed up.

In the afternoon, my family begins arriving at my grandmother's house. Everyone brings the same dish that they bring every year, but the consistency is what makes it exciting. After mingling and enjoying each other's company, my grandmother ushers us all to find seats at the table. We sit in fold-out tables and chairs in a long line through the middle of her living room. Before serving ourselves, we all join hands and go around the table sharing what we are thankful for this year. Family and health are two of the most common answers, and my aunt and grandmother always shed tears of love. By the time we get around the table, the food has cooled down, but I love that we are willing to sacrifice having a hot meal to take a few minutes to be thankful.

After dinner, my grandmother brings out musical instruments and games. We have a "hootenanny" and play kazoos and bongos and other plastic instruments out of tune. Then, we switch to games and people break off into smaller conversations. The night dies down and everyone jokes about "rolling home" because they are so stuffed. We all help do the dishes and take leftovers home to enjoy for the rest of the week.

This celebration is something that we look forward to all year, and that is because we have made it our own. It is a time to be thankful for the people who have made it into our lives and to share a meal with those who are valuable to us. Since all my aunts have been remarried

at least once, there are always new people at the table and people that we may never see again. Our family lacks a consistent structure, but we have used this holiday to embrace it and widen the definition of family.

In a broader sense, our Thanksgiving is uniquely American in the way it has evolved and become what we want it to mean. The first Thanksgiving has been documented by the colonizer and fits into the master narrative: it meets our needs for celebration and cohesion. My family's multi-day celebration is an extension of American culture. Being a predominantly White family, we have the power and freedom to construct and practice traditions in ways that align with our values. Many people do not have this freedom, especially Native Americans. I have struggled with this American holiday because of the inherent narrative that frames this holiday as a success and tradition that is able to be continued without reconsideration.

Specifically, Thanksgiving makes me think of bell hooks. When she says, "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body," I understand this to mean that Native Americans are painted as part of the story of Thanksgiving, but not as the center of the story. In kindergarten, we put feathers on brown construction paper to dress up as "Indians" and wore button-up shirts to dress as pilgrims. Our dress-up celebration was told in jest, but from the perspective of the "center." In addition to being offensive, it is painfully minimalizing. I can only summarize this feeling through bell hooks' line, "... speaking about colonization and the reality of what it means to be taught in a culture of domination by those who dominate."

As much as I love Thanksgiving in my family, I understand our ability to adapt the narrative, just as the colonizers have. I can assume that our celebration is roughly similar to other Americans', but we have added our own elements that make it meaningful to us while still calling it Thanksgiving. The power of naming and the power of deciding what counts as a Thanksgiving celebration is a reminder of the social power that my family has and the subtlety of privilege.