Thanksgiving: A Word of Action
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Thanksgiving, like many holidays, is formed around a story—how the Wampanoag Indians shared their harvest’s bounty with hungry Mayflower pilgrims. The festival celebrated the harvest in a new land and the survival of settlers who ventured out across the Atlantic Ocean.

Emotions probably ran high on that voyage. Along with uncertainty for the present and future, the travelers probably felt optimism about civil and religious liberty and hope that all would be well, that dreams would be realized, and prosperity would come.

This first Thanksgiving was not a holiday, but simply a gathering of grateful people. The settlers’ first year had been bleak. Their seeds did not produce any usable crops. Many of their company had died. Fortunately, the local Native American tribe introduced the settlers to native foods such as corn and squash and showed them how to hunt and fish.

Today Thanksgiving provides an occasion for reunions of friends and families and a substantial feast to enjoy. It brings people together in expectation and a calm, happy, and thankful state of mind. It is celebrated in the golden warmth of autumn, trees filled with orange and red, the cool crisp evenings bringing the first hints of winter with scents of pumpkin pie and the turkey roasting in the oven.

So, why do we eat what we eat on Thanksgiving? Does it come down through the centuries from that first gathering, or, more likely, is it the story of a mix of old and new customs from the melting pot of America, making for many variations on the traditional Thanksgiving meal.

Why the Turkey?
Although there were definitely wild turkeys in the Plymouth area, the accounts of the first Thanksgiving don’t mention turkey. They do however, mention the Pilgrims gathering “wild fowl” for the meal, although that could just as likely have meant ducks or geese.

Benjamin Franklin campaigned to adopt the turkey as the national bird, and turkey gained traction as the meal of choice after President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863. There were pragmatic reasons for eating turkey rather than, say, chicken at a least like Thanksgiving. The birds are large enough to feed a table full of hungry family members, and unlike chickens or cows, they don’t serve much utilitarian purpose like laying eggs or making milk. These reasons, along with aggressive marketing by farmers after World War II, helped make turkey the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving meal.

What About the Other Fixings?
It is unlikely that cranberry sauce was served at the first gathering. It was not until 1663 that visitors started commenting on a sweet sauce made of boiled cranberries that accompanied the meat. Neither sweet potatoes nor white potatoes were available to the colonists in 1621.

Although pumpkins were probably available, pumpkin pie didn’t make an appearance at the first Thanksgiving. It is possible that they did have a type of custard that was baked right inside the hollowed-out pumpkin shell. In 1796 an American cookbook was published by Amelia Simmons that contained a recipe similar to the pumpkin pie we know today with an actual crust.

More than a Meal
Regardless of the origins of the traditions, people now believe that Thanksgiving is a holiday about food—way too much food. And, it is the beginning of the holiday eating season that doesn’t end until Jan. 2.

During the holiday cultural and social influences combine to create a high-risk environment for gaining weight. A number of factors encourage over consumption: Meals take longer, easy access to food, eating in the presence of others, and larger portions. Studies report that meals eaten in the presence of others are 44 percent larger than meals eaten alone. Further, researchers reported that both their intervention and comparison groups found it difficult to effectively manage their weight between the Christmas and New Year period.

Nobody suggests that you diet on Thanksgiving, but you should know that this tradition-blessed binge can send your weight soaring up for the rest of the holidays and may be a major contributor to obesity later in life.

In addition to the food, Thanksgiving traditions revolve around family, parades, football, “A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving,” travel, and shopping. Many families gather to pause and give thanks, if not for good football, then for an opportunity and time of having loved ones together. For some it is a time to speak about those who are absent for their gathering this year: those serving overseas in the military, stuck in highway traffic, at work in hospitals, or serving in local soup kitchens.

It is time for telling stories—to listen to elderly relatives tell us about who we are, the world they lived in, and the families they watched grow. Family stories profoundly shape our lives, our identity and our sense of our place in the world. They give us values, inspiration, warnings, incentives. They reverberate throughout our lives, affecting our choices in love, work, friendship, and lifestyle. They remind us that we can always find something for which to be grateful—a beautiful day, a friend, the weekend, a warm place to sleep, petting a friendly dog, the laughter of children.
Gratitude consists of being more aware of what you have than what you don’t. We become so involved in the negative dramas of our lives that we see only the stress-filled job, rocky relationships, the doctor’s prognosis, the misbehaving children, and the lack of time. It is easy to get so caught up in the business of life that we can neglect to stop and give thanks where it is due, to coworkers, friends, and family.

Gratitude has been described as an emotion, a mood, a moral virtue, a habit, a motive, a personality trait, a coping response, and a way of life. We receive a gift, and we are thankful to the person who provided the kindness to us. From an evolutionary perspective, gratitude is the primary ingredient in social functioning and development. It helps individuals form and maintain relationships, and relationships are essential to the survival and well-being of individuals, groups, and societies.

If being thankful doesn’t come naturally to you it can be a learned behavior. Your goal should be to move the spirit of Thanksgiving from a one-day event to a basic life attitude. Every time you start to gripe about a situation, find a reason to be thankful. Having a bad day at work? Be thankful you have a job to pay the bills.

Studies show that thankful people have higher vitality, more optimism, and less stress and depression than the population as a whole. Positive psychology research, which focuses on the study of well-being, confirms that regular demonstrations of gratitude will make you happier and healthier. According to the work of psychology professor Robert Emmons, grateful people take better care of themselves and engage in more protective health behaviors like regular exercise, a healthy diet, and regular physical examinations. Emmons’ research also finds that grateful people tend to be more optimistic, a characteristic that boosts the immune system.

Happiness has been described as 50 percent determined by genetics, about 10 percent by things pursued in the name of happiness, with the remaining 40 percent determined by habits, behaviors, and thought patterns directly addressed with intentional action, such as expressing daily gratitude. Further, happiness cuts across economic lines. Contentment can’t tell the difference between a Camry and a Cadillac. The study found that folks who were appreciative for what they had (whether they had a lot or a little) were as happy as the people who had the most. More importantly, the people who were grateful for what they had, even if it wasn’t much, were twice as happy as those who actually had the most stuff.

Today, giving thanks is often overlooked as people can feel entitled to what they have. Thanksgiving provides a time to focus on the many gifts and good things that surround us. It also provides a chance to see the value of being in a state of gratitude and carrying around that feeling year around.

Thanksgiving Day is possibly the premier U.S. family celebration. It does not celebrate the winning of a battle or the gaining of independence, leaving it open to be celebrated by anybody, regardless of nationality, who would take stock and give thanks. Thanksgiving then becomes more than a holiday, but a word that takes on new meaning. Thanksgiving traditions prompt us to contemplate times past, to listen and understand the story, and to reflect on the reasons that we should be thankful. The holiday inspires us to resolve to give thanks—both in word and in action—even after our Thanksgiving celebration is over.

Thanksgiving is about the hopeful ideal of America: cultures converging, always evolving and changing, bringing an abundant and prosperous life. Like those earlier voyagers, this Thanksgiving offers uncertainty about what the future holds. But there is also hope that we will prevail through the tough times.

We are all given the gift of 86,400 seconds each day. Take action and use one to say thank you.


