

When Worlds Collide

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church
 November 22, 2009 *Thanksgiving Sunday*
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Some of you may remember the 1950's science fiction movie called *When Worlds Collide*. The images from it are forever imprinted in my mind. The plot of the movie was that the Earth was going to collide with another planet. In response to the dire prediction, the people in the movie were building a space ship to escape the Earth before the collision happened. The most memorable scene is near the end, right before the ship was to take off. The people on Earth looked up into the sky and saw this huge heavenly object coming toward them—it was so big it filled the sky. They hurriedly finishing the space ship to take them off the planet, for the result of the collision was the complete destruction of the Earth.

Truly, there are consequences “when worlds collide...”

The sci-fi story of the collision of worlds is really not very credible, but there have been many examples over the years in regard to the idea of the “end of the world” (including the current blockbuster film, 2012).

On the more realistic side there are many examples of what happens when worlds actually do collide. In fact, that's what the traditional Thanksgiving story we celebrate today is all about.

There are great differences from the movie version and what actually happened here in America. When worlds collided in 1621, between the European people and the ones who were already living here in America—the indigenous people—no one could not see what was coming. They had no idea of the collision about to take place. Neither the Europeans nor the inhabitants of this land could not have possibly understood the true nature of that first meeting, nor its outcome.

The fantasy story of the first Thanksgiving so embedded in our cultural history is interesting in that it is such a durable story. All of us are still able to relate to it, mostly, of course, from very different perspectives. Those of us over 50 remember being taught in school that the first Thanksgiving was a feast day, celebrating the struggle of the whites in their new and sometimes hostile, home. Nowadays, with the telling of the story from the viewpoint of Native Americans, the theme of the story shifts dramatically.

Robert Jensen, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, writes these words about the relationship of colliding worlds and the holiday we call Thanksgiving:

“One vehicle for taming history is the way our various patriotic holidays, with Thanksgiving at the heart of U.S. myth-building, informs us of our heritage. From an early age, we Americans hear a story about the hearty Pilgrims, whose search for freedom took them from England to Massachusetts. There, aided by the friendly Wampanoag Indians, they survived in a new and harsh environment, leading to a harvest feast in 1621 following the Pilgrims first winter.

“Some aspects of the conventional story are true enough. But it's also true that by 1637 Massachusetts Gov. John Winthrop was proclaiming a thanksgiving for the successful massacre of hundreds of Pequot Indian men, women and children, part of the long and bloody process of opening up additional land to the English invaders. The pattern would repeat itself across the continent until between 95 and 99 percent of American Indians had been exterminated and the rest were left to assimilate into white society or die off on reservations, out of the view of polite society.”

Jensen concludes, “Simply put: Thanksgiving is the day when the dominant white culture...celebrates the beginning of a genocide that was, in fact, blessed by the men we hold up as our heroic founding fathers.”

This story is about the collision of worlds. And in a way, all of America's history is a summation of different collisions of cultures. It has happened and is still happening all the time in all kinds of ways.

The historical interest in all of these collisions is how each of the groups *reacted* as a result of those collisions. What were the repercussions? What was the outcome of the meeting?

Let's think about our collective American history for a moment. Think about 1492 when Columbus landed here. Two incredibly different worlds collided on that fateful day over 500 years ago. Since then, we have learned of the implications and the results of that collision, and especially in the way the two cultures *acted* after it.

In 1619 another significant collision took place in American history—a savagely forced meeting to be sure—but this was the year the first Africans were brought here in slavery. Consider for a moment the effects of that meeting and the acts which inspired it in the first place and which followed in its wake.

Two years later the pilgrims came to this land and the bounteous harvest after their first harsh winter here signified, of course, what we recognize as our first Thanksgiving.

Now, I want to say that I really do like the idea of reacting to the meeting of cultures *with thanksgiving*. This implies that we are better off than we were before we met the other. Unfortunately, the subsequent acts of the Europeans were less than what the indigenous people might want to be thankful for, as the years rolled on.

There have been (and still are) many other collisions in our history. We collided with the culture of the Mexicans in 1836 at the battle of the Alamo in Texas, where independence, of all things, is honored.

We Americans even collided with *each other* during the Civil War, which we dutifully declare was fought as a battle to end slavery.

Other significant collisions include the conquering of the Wild West, which mainly meant the eradication of the people who lived there, (or we should say *here*.) The spanning of the continent with the railroad was an important part of our Westward expansion and it necessarily included the story of our collision with Asian culture, and how the people from Asia were greeted and introduced to the American experience—as slaves forced to build those railroads.

In 1920, after 70 years of protests, women finally collided with men at *the ballot box* and that collision is still radiating its influence in our society today.

Then, there are the collisions of religions. Of sexual and gender identities. Of economic and governance policies. There's even a collision between the idea of the individual and the idea of community.

American history truly is a series of stories of worlds colliding.

And yet today, we celebrate a holiday which may have started it all, at least here in America, and it is called Thanksgiving.

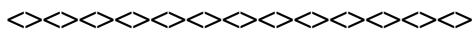
We celebrate this holiday based on that collision of worlds back in 1621. We say, “Thank you very much!” to something or someone, while yet living in astonishing denial of the incalculable suffering emanating from the crash.

Are we thanking the people who lived in this land for allowing us to take it over, even as we erased every trace of their existence?

Truly, this day might ought to be a Day of Mourning—a time for begging forgiveness for what Robert Jensen calls “America's original sin.” Perhaps today should be a call for repentance, of turning away from our sins and atoning for them. Maybe it should even be a day for repayment to those sinned against.

Jensen writes, “One indication of moral progress in the United States would be the replacement of Thanksgiving Day and its self-indulgent family feasting with a National Day of Atonement accompanied by a self-reflective collective fasting.”

“In fact, indigenous people have offered such a model; since 1970 they have marked the fourth Thursday of November as a Day of Mourning in a spiritual/political ceremony on Coles Hill overlooking Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, one of the early sites of the European invasion of the Americas.”



Of course, none of that is going to happen in our culture, for we are so securely fixed in our ways. And most of us will gather together for the great feast on this Thursday.

I personally think we *should do* that, and we're going to offer an example of it right after this service today.

Hear this: It is a good thing to gather. It is a good thing to be thankful.

It is also a good thing—actually, a *required* thing—to *remember*. In our prayers we pray at the beginning of this thanksgiving meal, let us bring to mind our many blessings, our many gifts given to us, and let us also remember our history, our complicity, our appropriation of the land and the power that came from it.

We are who we are because of those who came before us, those who sacrificed so that we might be who we are, and those who gave up their lives, even as they were taken by force.

Let us gather. Let us give thanks. Let us remember.

Amen.