Thanksgiving Chapel Talk
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Less than a week from tonight, most of us will be celebrating Thanksgiving.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Americans will spend the day devouring 535 million pounds of the “bird of courage,” as Benjamin Franklin called the turkey. (This will come only after some 100,000 people call the Butterball Turkey hotline for help preparing the valiant bird.) Millions of pounds of potatoes and sweet potatoes will be consumed. Some 40 million green bean casseroles will be eaten. Twenty percent of all the cranberries consumed over the course of the year will be consumed on Thursday alone. Countless pies will be sliced and served, though a poor growing season has cast a dark shadow this year: the prospect of a shortage of pumpkin pie filling. (Lucky for us that no matter what happens on Thursday, we got to have some tonight.)

In millions of homes, avid football fans will plant themselves in front of TV screens and try to evade dishwashing duties. Of course, for many Americans, all this is mere prelude to the real culmination of the week: the frenzy of shopping that will take place on “Black Friday” – or now even on Thanksgiving itself, as stores like Wal-Mart promise to stay open all day and night on Thanksgiving to ease the crush of post-holiday shoppers.

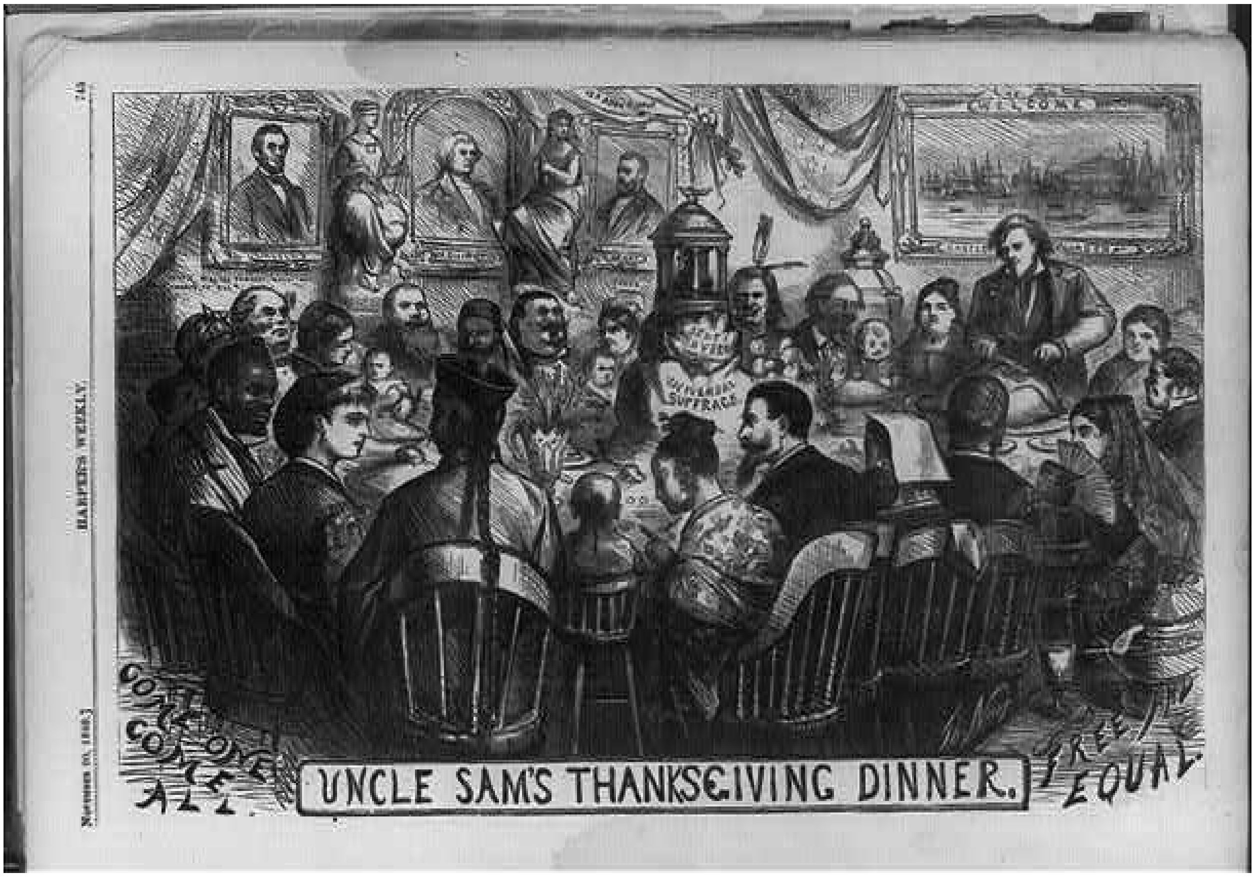
These must seem bizarre national rituals to many in the world – and perhaps they’re not wrong. But are these various forms of consumption all that Thanksgiving, the most American of holidays, has to offer?

Knowing that I’m an historian, you’ll probably be unsurprised that I think the best way to answer this question is to understand some of the strands that have been woven into this American tradition over the years. So let’s look at the evidence. What do the sources say?

But this is a question that only provokes further questions: what sources, and about what thanksgiving? After all, there are multiple layers of history and mythology surrounding American Thanksgiving, many of which do as much to obscure our understanding of the holiday as to illuminate it. The three-day 1621 harvest celebration in Plymouth, which most people refer to when describing the "First Thanksgiving," was not actually the first rite of thanks-giving on the shores of Cape Cod Bay. The Wampanoag tribe had long observed days of thanks for the bounty of the land. Further south, Texas, Florida and Virginia all claim European colonial thanksgivings that predate Plymouth's. And, according to some historians, the Pilgrims themselves would not have understood what we call the "First Thanksgiving" as a day of thanksgiving at all. For the Plymouth Separatists, days of thanksgiving were usually observed with prayer and fasting, not feasting.

Really, the creator of the Thanksgiving holiday as we know it was no Pilgrim, but rather one Sarah Josepha Hale. She was a reformer, novelist, and editor of a popular 19th century women's magazine. You're probably more familiar with her only poetic masterwork, "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Hale campaigned for years for an annual Thanksgiving, a "domestic holiday" which would "bring out… the best sympathies of our nature." Steeped in the sentimental culture of the Victorian era, this day would focus on the family and belong, as she put it, "to the hearth, at which woman should be ever present." (Thank you, Mrs. Hale!) It is her rendering of Thanksgiving that so many kitchens and dining rooms across the country will reflect on Thursday. In 1863, Hale finally convinced Abraham Lincoln of the value of her cause, and he established the tradition of a national Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of every November. It is to Sarah Josepha Hale that we owe a Thanksgiving celebration that largely revolves around the individual home, food and family (the football would come later).

There's yet another vision of Thanksgiving – of its power and its possibilities. I want to invite you to consider it tonight. For me, this vision crystallized when I first saw "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner," a November 1869 political cartoon by Thomas Nast, published in *Harper's Weekly* exactly 140 years ago today.



"Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner", Thomas Nast. Originally published in *Harper's Weekly* (November 20, 1869), p. 745. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Nast is probably the most important cartoonist in American history; even his contemporaries called him the "Father of American Caricature." His cartoons exposed the corruption of William "Boss" Tweed's New York political machine, presenting pictorial accounts of Tweed's dishonesty that even his illiterate constituents could "read." He popularized the donkey and elephant as symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties, and even created one of the first *American* images of Santa Claus. If you've seen a political cartoon from the 19th century, the chances are good that it was a Nast.

Nast filled his works with allegorical allusions, and "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner" is no exception. Uncle Sam, the personification of the American government, stands carving a turkey for the large group gathered together for the holiday celebration. Behind Sam hangs a painting of Castle Garden, the point of entry for 12 million immigrants arriving in New York City between 1820 and 1890; the painting is simply titled, "Welcome." At the other end of the table is a woman – Columbia – the symbolic embodiment of the American nation, conspicuously seated between an African-American man and his family on her left, and a Chinese-American man and his family on her right. At table with them are Americans of French, Arab, British, Italian, Spanish and Irish descent, as well as a Native American man. This racial and ethnic diversity is something worth celebrating, Nast suggests; a national gift for which Americans should give thanks.

Now, we might be tempted to see this image as troublingly sentimental and naïve. After all, how could Thomas Nast in 1869 declare that the men and women at his American table were "Free and Equal"? (Words you'll see in the lower right corner.) In the four years since the end of the Civil War, whites had been actively resisting Republican efforts to realize Reconstruction's promise of equality. Southern states passed Black Codes to restrict the rights of African-Americans. Race riots broke out in Memphis and New Orleans in 1866, with black men and women attacked and killed in the streets by angry whites. That same year, a group of Confederate veterans founded the Ku Klux Klan. In 1869 – the very year Thomas Nast drew this image – Tennessee became the first state to "redeem" itself. In what did Tennessee's "redemption" consist? In replacing a bi-racial state government with an all-white one.

African-Americans were certainly not the only ones to face oppression and violence in this period. The year before Nast created this image, Colonel George Armstrong Custer led an attack on a Cheyenne village in Oklahoma, killing more than 100 Native American men, women and children, many of whom had survived the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado just four years earlier. Even as the U.S. Senate approved a treaty allowing unrestricted immigration from China, these immigrants faced deep racism and economic exploitation. Irish-Americans continued to encounter strong anti-Catholic prejudice; signs warning "No Irish Need Apply" were fixtures in shop windows in many American cities.

Thomas Nast knew this. "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner" is not an announcement that everyone actually enjoys a place at the table in 1869, "Free and Equal." Rather, Nast offers his audience a vision of the possible, of what America could be. With a monument to "Universal Suffrage" as the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving table, the cartoon argued for ratification of the

15th Amendment, which would guarantee voting rights to all male citizens, regardless of race. (In fact, Congress had already passed the Amendment; at the time this cartoon was published, the states were deciding whether to ratify the Amendment.) Nast's image is a visual provocation: it demands of its viewers that we do more than simply appreciate the gifts we already have. It challenges us to envisage a better society, and to make that vision real. We should give thanks, according to this idea of Thanksgiving, not only for what we have, but for what we might make of our common life.

In the depths of the Depression, in his 1934 Presidential Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, Franklin Delano Roosevelt embraced a vision of Thanksgiving's opportunities similar to that of Nast.

> During the past year we have been given courage and fortitude to meet the problems which have confronted us in our national life. Our sense of social justice has deepened. We have been given vision to make new provisions for human welfare and happiness, and in a spirit of mutual helpfulness we have cooperated to translate vision into reality….
>
> With gratitude in our hearts for what has already been achieved, may we, with the help of God, dedicate ourselves anew to work for the betterment of mankind.

Roosevelt argues, perhaps echoing Nast, that with thanks must come a commitment to giving.

These are Thanksgiving traditions worth recovering. To acknowledge their message does not mean we should spend Thanksgiving feeling guilty. We should absolutely relish and give thanks for the gifts we enjoy, as individuals, as a school community, and as a nation. But we should also think about the unfinished work, the vision of a better world that is not yet real – and won't be until everyone has a place at the table, "Free and Equal," "Come One, Come All." In Jewish tradition, a place at the Passover Seder is always made and deliberately left unfilled, for the prophet Elijah, the one who will come to announce the Messiah. Can we do more to make places at the American table, for those who are in the house or at the door, but as yet have no share in the meal.

Particularly on a day of feasting, we might consider those who don't have access to the plenty that our tables will hold on Thursday. According to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture – the very same Department of Agriculture that informed us that Americans will eat 535 million pounds of turkey this Thanksgiving – the number of people in this country who faced “food insecurity” last year rose last year to 49 million, the highest it has been since the government began compiling this data. This means that in 2008, 49 million Americans could not count on consistent access to adequate food. One third of those households had “very low food security,” forced to skip or severely limit meals. Particularly sharp and troubling is the rise in the number of children living in households with “very low food security.” It is children, too, who bear so much of the burden of homelessness. Some studies suggest that 39% of those who are homeless in America today are kids. The ton of food that our community contributed to the Delaware Food Bank is a wonderful beginning, but it should not be the end of our work.

In an 1864 essay entitled, “Pictures,” the abolitionist and woman’s rights advocate Frederick Douglass argued:

> Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction

So this Thanksgiving, let’s all seek to be picture makers, as Thomas Nast was in 1869. As we prepare our turkeys and stuffing and pies, and gather with family and friends, let’s celebrate and be thankful for all of the blessings we have. But let’s also hold up in our mind’s eye Nast’s image of radical inclusion, and remember who’s missing from the larger table. The work still remains to remove the contradiction between what is and what ought to be. If the work seems too daunting – there are so many in need – we should heed the lesson of the Jewish Rabbinic tradition: “The task may not be ours to finish, but neither are we free to abandon it.”

Happy Thanksgiving.